

Watchman Nee:

We have seen the Church as a thorn in Satan's side, causing him acute discomfort and reducing his freedom of movement. Though in the world, the Church not only refuses to aid in the world's construction but persists in pronouncing judgment upon it. But if this is true, if the Church is always a source of irritation to the world, then equally the world is a source of constant grief to the Church. And because the world is always developing, its power to distress God's people is ever expanding; in fact the Church has to meet a force in the world today with which in the early days she was not confronted at all. Then the children of God met open persecution in the shape of outward physical assault upon their persons (Acts 12; 2 Corinthians 11). They were always coming into collision with material, tangible things. Now the chief trouble they meet in the world is more subtle, an intangible force behind its material things, that is not holy but spiritually evil. The impact of that spiritual force today is far greater than it was then. And not only is it greater; there is an element present now that was not there formerly.

In Revelation 9 we read of a development which, to the author of that book, lay far in the future. "The fifth angel sounded, and I saw a star from heaven fallen unto the earth: and there was given to him the key of the pit of the abyss. And he opened the pit of the abyss; and there went up a smoke out of the pit, as the smoke of a great furnace.... And out of the smoke came forth locusts upon the earth; and power was given them, as the scorpions of the earth have power. And it was said unto them that they should not hurt the grass of the earth, neither any green thing, neither any tree, but only such men as have not the seal of God on their foreheads" (verses 1-4). This is figurative language, but the star falling from heaven obviously refers to Satan, and we know that the bottomless pit is his domainhis storehouse, we might say. Thus it appears that the end time is to be marked by a special release of his forces, and men will find themselves up against a spiritual power with which they had not before to contend.

Surely this accords with conditions in our day. While it is true that sin and violence will be greater than ever at the close of this age, it is apparent from God's Word that it is not specifically these with which the Church will have to grapple then, but with the spiritual appeal of far more everyday things. "As it came to pass in the days of Noah, even so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They ate, they drank, they married, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered into the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise even as it came to pass in the days of Lot; they ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; but in the day that Lot went out from Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all" (Luke 17:26,29). The point being made here by Jesus is not that these things-food, marriage, trade, agriculture, engineering-were outstanding characteristics of Lot's and Noah's day, but that they will in a special way characterize the last days. "After the same manner shall it be in the day that the Son of man is revealed" (verse 30): that is the point. For these things are not inherently sinful; they are simply things of the world. Have you ever in all your days paid such attention to the good life as now? Food and raiment are becoming the special burden of God's children today. What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Wherewithal shall we be clothed? For many these are almost the sole topics of conversation. There is a power that forces you to consider these matters; your very existence demands that you pay attention to them.

And yet Scripture warns us that "the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness" and so on. It bids us first of all seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and assures us that as we do so, all these things will be added to us. It bids us be carefree regarding matters of food and clothing, for if God cares for the flowers of the field and the birds of the air, will he not much rather care for us, his own? Yet to judge by our anxieties it would almost seem that they are cared for, but not we!

Now here is the point that needs special emphasis. This condition of things is abnormal. The undue attention to eating and drinking, whether at the extremes of subsistence or luxury, that characterizes so many Christians these days is far from normal; it is supernatural. For it is not just a question of food and drink that we are meeting here; we are meeting demons. Satan conceived and now controls the world order, and is prepared to use demonic power through the things of the world to lure us into it. The present state of affairs cannot be accounted for apart from this. Oh that the children of God might awaken to this fact! In past days God's saints met all sorts of difficulties; yet, in the midst of pressure, they could look up and trust God. In the pressures of today, however, they are so confused and bewildered that they seem unable to trust him. Oh, let us realize the Satanic origin of all this pressure and confusion!

The same is true in matrimonial affairs. Never have we met so many problems in this field as today. There is confusion abroad as young people break with old traditions but lack the guidance of any new ones to replace them. This fact is not to be accounted for naturally, but supernaturally. Marrying and giving in marriage are

wholesome and normal in any age, but today there is an element breaking into these things that is unnatural.

So it is with planting and building, and so too with buying and selling. All these things can be perfectly legitimate and beneficial, but today the power behind them presses upon men until they are bewildered and lose their balance. The evil force that energizes the world system has precipitated a condition today where we see two extremes; the one extreme of utter inability to make ends meet, and the other extreme of unusual opportunity to amass wealth. On the one hand many Christians find themselves in unprecedented economic difficulties: on the other hand many are faced with no less unprecedented opportunities of enriching themselves. Both of these conditions are abnormal.

Enter any home these days and listen in on the conversation. You will hear remarks such as these: "Last week I bought such-and-such goods at such-and-such a figure, and I have thereby saved so much." "Happily I purchased that a year ago, otherwise I would have lost badly." "If you want to sell, sell now while the market is good." Have you not noticed the way people are rushing here and there, feverishly making business deals? Doctors are stocking up with flour, cloth manufacturers are selling paper, men and women who have never touched such things before are being swept off their feet by the current of speculation. They are caught up in a marketing maelstrom that is whirling them madly around. Do you not realize that this state of affairs is not natural? Do you not see that there is a power here which is captivating men? People are not acting sanely; they are beside themselves. Today's buying and selling spree is not just a question of making a little money-or losing it. It is a question of touching a Satanic system. We are living in the end time, a time when a special power has been let loose which is driving men on, whether they will or no.

So the question today is not so much one of sinfulness as of worldliness. Who would dare to say you do wrong to eat and drink? Who would dare to disapprove of marrying and giving in marriage? Who would question your right to buy and sell? These things are not in themselves wrong; the wrong lies in the spiritual force behind them, which, through their medium, presses relentlessly upon us. Oh that we might awake to the fact that, whereas these things are so common and so simple, they are yet being used by Satan to ensnare God's children into the great net of his world order.

"Take heed to yourselves, lest haply your hearts be overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that day come on you suddenly as a snare" (Luke 21:34). Note the term "life" in Jesus' words. In the Greek New Testament three words are commonly used for life: zoe, spiritual life; psuche, psychological life; and bios, biological life. The last is the word used here, appearing in its adjectival form, biotikos, "of this life." The Lord is warning us to beware lest we be unduly pressed with this life's cares, that is to say, with anxieties regarding quite ordinary matters such as food and dress which belong to our present existence on the earth. It was over just such a simple thing that Adam and Eve fell, and it will be due to just such simple matters that some Christians may overlook the heavenward call of God. For it is always a matter of where the heart is. We are exhorted not to let our hearts be "overcharged" or "laden" with these things to our loss. That is to say, we are not to carry a burden regarding them that would weigh us down. We are to be in a true sense detached in spirit from our goods in the house or in the field (Luke 17:31).

For let us realize who we are! We are the Church, the light of the world shining amid the darkness. As such let us live our lives down here.

There was a time when the Church rejected the world's ways. Now she not only uses them; she abuses them. Of course we must use the world, because we need it; but let us not want it, let us not desire it. So Jesus continues, "Watch ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass and to stand (literally 'be set') before the Son of man" (Luke 21:36). Would God urge us to watch and pray were there not a spiritual force to guard against? We dare not take our destiny as a matter of course, but must be constantly on the alert that we be truly disentangled in spirit from the elements of this world. There are things of the world that are essential to our very existence. To be concerned with them is legitimate, but to be weighed down by them is illegitimate and may cause us to forfeit God's best.

The book of Revelation suggests that Satan will set up his kingdom of antichrist in the political world (Ch. 13), in the religious world (Ch. 17), and in the commercial world (Ch. 18). On this threefold basis of politics, religion and commerce, his reign will find its last violent expression. In the latter two chapters this kingdom appears under the figure of Babylon, the special instrument of Satan. Babylon seems to represent corrupted Christianity-Rome perhaps, but bigger and more insidious than Rome-and it is on the ground of her commerce that she is judged. The whole record of Chapter 18 revolves around merchants and merchandise. Those who bemoan the great city's fall, from the king right down to the ships' helmsmen, all bewail the thought that her flourishing trade has suddenly ceased. Evidently it is neither religion nor politics but trade that causes the spirit

of Babylon to flourish again, and that is bewailed in her downfall. We dare not emphatically state that pure commerce is wrong, but this we do say on the ground of God's own Word, that its beginning is connected with Satan (Ezek. 28) and its end with Babylon (Rev. 18). And this we add from hard earned experience, that commerce is the field in which, more than in any other, "the corruption that is in the world through lust" relentlessly pursues even the most high-principled of Christians, and apart from the grace of God, will all too easily overtake them to their undoing.

Are we sensitive to Babylon? The merchants wept, but heaven cried Hallelujah! (19:1). These (verses 1-6) are the only Hallelujahs recorded in the New Testament. Do we reecho them?

For we are in a perilous realm when we touch commerce. If by reason of our calling we engage in pure trade, and if we do so in fear and trembling, we may with God's help escape the snare of the Devil. But if we are overconfident, then there is no hope of escape from the unscrupulous self-seeking that such business engenders. So the problem that confronts us these days is not how to refrain from buying and selling, from eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage; the problem now is to avoid the power behind these things, for we dare not let that power triumph over us.

What, then, is the secret of holding our material things in the will of God? Surely it is to hold them for God, that is to say, to know we are not hoarding useless valuables, or amassing vast bank deposits, but laying up treasures to his account. You and I must be perfectly willing to part with anything at any moment. It matters not whether I leave two thousand dollars or merely two. What matters is whether I can leave what ever I have without a twinge of regret.

I am not suggesting by this that we must try to dispose of everything; that is not the point. The point is that as God's children you and I may not accumulate things for ourselves. If I keep something it is because God has spoken to my heart; if I part with it it is for the same reason. I hold myself in the will of God and am not afraid to give if God asks me to give. I keep nothing because I love it, but let it go without regret when the call comes to leave it behind. That is what it means to be detached, free, separated to God.