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LIVING THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

***The
Gospel
in the
Home***

SHEILA WILSON

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The Gospel in the Home

Finding somewhere to live in these days is a problem; even before marriage the search for a home begins, for it is natural for a man and his wife to want a home of their own. Most people, however, fail to realize that God instituted this natural desire. In the beginning it was His will that a home should be the basis for marriage and family life.

"Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and cleave unto his wife." (Gen. 2:24)

In spite of disappointments and frustrations during their search, the couple usually know exactly what they are looking for and are determined to find a satisfactory home. Confidence is at its peak in youth, the urge to be free of the parents' authority is strong and there is so much to do and to look forward to in life. Newly married people naturally feel that life will be wonderful and that all troubles can be faced and overcome as long as they are together. They are convinced that they have a better relationship than most: other marriages may become hum-drum, other husbands may grow bored and their wives harassed: other couples may lose their affection for one another, but theirs will be a perfect marriage in an ideal home.

It is perhaps a blessing that this assurance lasts during early marriage to tide the husband and wife over difficult times; when the house seems much less homely than their parental homes and they begin to discover that they are both far from perfect. Gradually they accept the fact that they are ordinary human beings with the same problems and experiences as others.

The emphasis in the present world is on romance and excitement which have very little to do with real home life, although after a taste of these things in youth many expect them to continue into marriage, and experience an unpleasant shock when they find they are no longer "in love" as they were during courting days. They are even more shattered when the baby arrives and after the initial fuss and excitement they are left to get on with the job of caring for a new, demanding human being who intrudes into every aspect of their lives.

Realities to be faced

Time passes, and suddenly comes the realization that most of those things to which they had looked forward are now behind them; some are never-to-be-repeated experiences such as their wedding-day and the birth of the first baby, yet both are still young and energetic and many years stretch ahead. The husband is faced with the prospect of many working years and family responsibilities, and the wife realizes that the home is to be her environment day in, day out, the work unvarying and often rather dull, with the lively but sometimes inconvenient company of children.

Dissatisfaction and aimlessness prove a testing time in every marriage and spell the beginning of another search, but this time they are not always sure what they are seeking. Before marriage both knew what they wanted; this time the goal is not so clearly visible in their minds, but they need a purpose and aim in life, something to work for, to save for and look forward to, for their life has been conditioned to these things. In many cases a common purpose is found, and often in these materialistic times the home itself becomes the main interest and the couple devote all their time, energy and money into making their house beautiful, deriving some satisfaction from the admiration and envy of their friends. Perhaps the annual holiday becomes their common aim and they look

forward all the year to a spending spree, a change or an adventure when for two or three weeks they will pretend to be different, more glamorous people.

The search for a purpose

Possibly the husband and wife may choose different interests: he may turn to his work, his friends, his sport: she may also look outwards and take up a career which demands maximum time and thought. If this state of things continues with either husband or wife, then home life begins to matter less. Houses and holidays may help to satisfy when life runs smoothly and yet when times are good, there is always the effort to keep clean and tidy, to feed the family and to make ends meet: but when things go wrong - someone is ill or out of work - then the struggle becomes intolerable and life a burden. Anxiety and pain are then seen to be the real issues of life and there seems to be no prospect of anything else. At such a time the search for a purpose in life becomes more urgent. What is the point of life and what is there to hope for? What is the purpose of carefully building up a home and a marriage and bringing up the children?

One who has the answers

Probably most people ask these questions at some time in their lives, and happy indeed are those who have already been given the answers and who can now begin to apply them. There is good news for all who are worried by such problems, for there is One who has the answer and who calls out "*Come to me, all of you who are over-burdened, and I will ease and refresh your minds.*" His answer to the search for a purpose in life is forthright: "*Take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? ... for your Heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.*" (Matt. 6:31-33)

Not only did Jesus give the good news of something to look forward to, he also assured us that in putting this first we should find true satisfaction in this life and the solution to everyday problems.

Originally in the search for a home we had definite ideas of what we were looking for, so in this new search we also need to know what to aim for and how to find it. We discover that the Gospel of the Kingdom of God involves a restoration of our troubled world to full well-being. Jesus himself is to return in glory and reign over all. Peace, justice and righteousness will then take the place of all present evils and our problems will be no more. As we read more of Jesus' Gospel we realize that his Kingdom will be very different in many ways from this present life. "*There will be no marrying nor giving in marriage*", he said, and he told us plainly not to lay up treasures on earth, but treasures in Heaven where moth and rust cannot harm nor thieves steal. How very different from this life, where our home is based upon marriage and upon material "treasures" which we consider to be essential comforts. It appears then that all we have coveted and built up - our present home - is for nothing, for now we must prepare for an entirely different state of things. How can our home and family relationships help to prepare us for the Kingdom of God?

God's institution

In the beginning God Himself instituted home and family life, and He also issued strict rules concerning marriage and family relationships to the nation of Israel. Jesus also endorsed what had been laid down by his Father:

"He which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother and shall cleave to his wife, and they twain shall be one flesh." (Matt. 19:4-6)

Through the words of Jesus we are led to understand that this Divine Law was for a purpose, and in Ephesians 5 the Apostle Paul further explains the mystery when he draws a parallel between the marriage of a man and woman and the relationship between Christ and his followers (the Church).

God instituted marriage as a means of teaching us the principle of unity. It is His will that all the earth should be in harmony and perfect affinity with Him, but Adam and Eve sinned and forfeited their close relationship with God. Sinful human beings are only capable of small achievements, yet in the mercy of God we can be guided, one step at a time, to an understanding of His greatness and a participation in His purpose. Our first step towards the Kingdom of God is in striving to be "one" with our partner in marriage - not only in body but also in mind. How difficult it is to achieve "one-mindedness" between husband and wife, for we know one another's faults so well, and in the closeness of our home we cannot hide our natural selfishness. Self-control and courtesy are hard to maintain, and we often give vent to our feelings. We realize ours is by no means an ideal home, and certainly we are not fit to be a pattern of the union intended by God.

The standard of love

Many of us can truthfully say that we love one another, but does our love compare with that shown by Jesus for his followers? We are influenced, perhaps unwittingly, by the attitude of the world, and love is a word which means our natural feelings, emotions and passions. Yet Jesus' love was not that, for he died for people who were sinners, who deserted him, despised him, killed him, and also for many whom he had never met. This kind of love was far stronger than ours, which easily vanishes under stress. There is a whole chapter in the New Testament devoted to the subject of love. It is a definition of God's love and the love which Christ had within him.

"Love endures long, and is patient and kind; love is never envious nor boils over with jealousy: is not boastful or vain, does not display itself haughtily. It is not conceited; it is not rude and does not act unbecomingly. Love does not insist on its own rights or its own way, for it is not self-seeking: it is not touchy or fretful or resentful: it takes no account of the evil done to it: it does not rejoice at injustice and unrighteousness, but rejoices when right and truth prevail. Love bears up under anything and everything that comes; is ever ready to believe the best of every person: its hopes are fadeless and enduring under all circumstances." (1 Cor. 13:4-8 Amplified N.T.)

After reading that list with care we realize that this kind of love is not natural to us; it has to be learnt, and the best place in which to learn such a lesson is essentially the home. Here is a daily challenge to our selfish nature, an ideal to work for, and we realize that all our other seeking has been for the pleasure of our natural senses, as in the case of Adam and Eve. The result of their search was a disharmony and trouble which has also been the result of our seeking when directed towards selfish ends.

As we begin to compare ourselves and our love for one another with Jesus and his love, we comprehend our selfishness and see that we are indeed sinners far removed from God. Shall we ever be in the Kingdom, we often wonder? A Christadelphian hymn asks this question and answers it:

*"Shall we be with him ill that day?
We make the answer now."*

The place of each member

God has set us a standard to attain in our home; moreover He has given the different members of the family a particular place and role. Each one must fulfil his part, for the good of himself and the whole family.

The standard set for the husband is particularly high. He is to be like Jesus and must learn to care for his wife as much as he cares for himself despite all her faults and failings. He must be considerate and kind because she is weaker physically, and yet he must respect her because through Christ she has equal status with him in spiritual things.

From the beginning the husband and father has been the head of the home; his task to provide, protect and care for the members of his family. God took the man and put him into the Garden of Eden to care for it and God forbid him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eve was then formed out of Adam, and God gave Adam authority and charge over her. This is confirmed by the apostle Paul, who says that a woman should not usurp authority over the man because Adam was first formed, then Eve (1 Tim. 2:12). Husbands tend to regard their authority and responsibility as mainly economic and forget that they are meant to be faithful and constant guardians in the home. We wonder what Adam was doing when the serpent was beguiling his wife: perhaps doing the Lord's work somewhere in the Garden, but neglecting his most important duty.

It is made clear in the New Testament that unless there is a correct attitude on the husband's part his prayers will be cut off (1 Peter 3:7).

What does the Lord require of the housewives and mothers who would follow him? The woman plays an important part in every home, for traditionally she is the home-maker, the one who has the ability to transform a house into a warm, secure welcoming place.

Woman's place today

Originally, the woman was created with a nature to complement that of her husband; her mind and character were not as strong as his, for it was his duty to make decisions. Eve's craving for something attractive which she was not allowed to have and her ambition for equality with the angels were provoked by the serpent's words. She was deceived, we are told, and instead of seeking a decision from Adam she took the initiative upon herself, then persuaded him, and Adam, knowing what he was doing, followed his wife into sin. As a result the state of the woman was changed. Said God: *"I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; and in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee."*

This pronouncement was the end of Eve's leisure and self-indulgence; and throughout the ages until this century, many women have suffered from the hard rulership of unenlightened men and the degradation of constant pregnancies.

We are unconsciously influenced by the society in which we live, and take for granted the "equal rights" attitude of the women of our day who are freed from their husbands' authority and have the law on their side. Married women can earn sometimes as much as their husbands, and modern methods of family planning have relieved the problems their grandmothers had due to frequent child-bearing. The suffragettes who campaigned for the emancipation of women were confident that women would be happier as a result of their efforts and that home life would be greatly enriched; but this is far from being so, for today there are increased separations and divorces, and terms such as "broken homes" and "nervous breakdowns" are familiar to us all. The facts point to the emancipation of women as one of the main causes of these troubles. Why is this so? Is the world wrong in setting an ambitious standard of independence for women, encouraging them to achieve as much as men in their education, their careers and even in government?

One who served

As followers of Jesus we must accept his words, and there is no indication that he withdrew the sentence passed upon womankind. The evils of human nature made God's pronouncement a curse,

but through the example of Jesus we can understand that it was given for our good. Most women have inherited Eve's susceptibilities, and the authority of a good husband as well as the demands of a family curb these natural tendencies and self-indulgences and provide an opportunity for women to develop characters acceptable to the Lord - meek, willing to serve, selfless.

Our acceptance of this is made easier when we realize that the Lord Jesus Christ himself spent his life on earth as one who served. Even when he understood his calling and astonished the doctors in the Temple with his knowledge at the age of twelve, he went back to Nazareth with his humble parents and "was subject unto them". This subjection lasted until he was about thirty years old, during which time he lived what would be an obscure and probably monotonous life, the everyday routine of home life his chief training-ground. Yet in spite of all the struggles and difficulties common to most big families without much money, Jesus increased in favour with God and man, and when he submitted to baptism by John, God Himself acknowledged that Jesus was His Son in whom He was well pleased.

His subjection and experience of home-life make Jesus of great interest and importance to women. He took upon himself the form of a servant, willingly, and declared that he came not to be ministered unto but to minister. For most of his life Jesus manifested the love of God at home, and then when the time came for his public ministry he extended his love far beyond family and home. He poured himself out for everyone with whom he came in touch, serving the hungry, the sick and the needy, patiently ministering to those with whom he was in close daily contact, the twelve disciples, even to the one whom he knew would betray him; and finally he knelt before them in the most menial of tasks, the washing of their feet.

No easy task

When we rebel indignantly at our menial jobs, day by day, cleaning, working at the sink, tidying up, making meals, and when we feel and say that we are nothing but servants in the home, we would do well to remember Jesus and to remind ourselves that in God's sight there is nothing more pleasing than a humble and willing servant. We may also recall Mary's words: "*Be it unto me according to thy word.*"

It is no easy task to be a housewife in these days when the pace of life is hectic and we are expected to accomplish so many jobs with the help of modern machines; when too we are no longer expected to stay at home. We reap the so-called benefits of higher education, yet a mind trained in modern thinking is not the easiest to quell nor to adopt the attitude of a servant. Jesus counteracted Eve's thinking by his own which he expressed in the Sermon on the Mount. Happy are those who count themselves as of no more importance than others, whose desire is to please God and submit to His Will; who firmly believe that God will provide for all their needs in the best way, and who keep their outlook towards enduring things instead of on material, meaningless matters.

The exemplary woman is revealed in the last chapter of Proverbs - in old-fashioned terms perhaps, but painting a picture of willing service and selflessness; a woman quick to see the needs of husband and family so that the home is well cared for and is an influence for good in the community. She is never idle and is respected and loved by her household. There is no weakness in such a woman, for as a result of her service she is clothed in character with strength and honour. In the future she will rejoice and she will be praised because she has served the Lord in her home.

Parenthood

There are varying attitudes in the world towards being a mother; some find the demands too great to bear or just irksome, whereas others consider it a duty or even a joy. Women of faith in Scripture, far from considering children an affliction, considered it a reproach when they were barren, for they

hoped to give birth to the Saviour whom God had promised in the beginning; a son who would bring salvation instead of death and who would restore righteousness. Hannah is a woman from whom we can learn much about motherhood. She was a woman of understanding and faith married to a Levite who had annual duties in the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Every year she accompanied him, yet her soul burned within her when she saw the evil which was consuming Israel and the wickedness of the priests who were corrupting the people. Hannah was childless, and this limitation grieved her deeply. She prayed for a son, not just for her own gratification, but a child who would be of service to God - a saviour in those troubled times for Israel. She vowed to teach this child from the earliest opportunity to serve the Lord and to return him as soon as he was old enough to minister before God and the people in the temple.

Our attitude towards children should be in the same spirit as Hannah's, for we realize that there is no future in merely encouraging our children to "get on" in this world. Our aim should be to give them back to the Lord, and we should do our utmost to encourage them to become His sons and daughters, emphasizing that their education or personal talent should be directed into the service of God.

The nurture of the child

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with the whole heart, strength and mind, and many years before God had commanded parents to teach this same commandment diligently to their children. They were to speak constantly about God, His purpose and works, during everyday family life. From very early days children can become aware of God and accept Him as their protector and provider. Most small children seem to have a natural aptitude for belief in the invisible, and complicated questions do not usually arise until they become older. If the parents show a natural and implicit trust in God and a love for His Word; if they show this trust and love by upholding God's standards in behaviour and morals, then these things become ingrained in the child, part of him. We can quote the Proverb on this subject: "*Train up (or dedicate) a child in the way he should go; and when he is old he will not depart from it.*"

Through his parents a child learns his first lessons in life; during early years his character begins to take shape and first impressions are lasting. Home to a child means parents; not a house but a father and mother who are "always" there; not regular substitutes such as day-nurseries and baby-sitters while his parents are away pursuing other interests without him.

Besides love, his basic needs are security and discipline. A sense of belonging or unity is the essence of security; for instance, a material thing such as food matters less to him than the feeling of togetherness at family meals, with father, mother, brothers, sisters gathered round sharing the meal. This unity is the security he will remember. Nowadays mealtimes are perhaps the only times during the day when all the family can be together, and such opportunities of fellowship are lost if the children are encouraged to stay for school meals, or subsist on quick snacks for the convenience of a mother who goes out to work.

The need for restraint

Discipline and correction are unpopular words nowadays, and we find that our neighbours' children are encouraged by their parents to adopt a "me first" attitude to life. Their aim is to get to the top and disregard all other feelings and circumstances but their own. Our service as parents must be given wisely, for our own self-denial is of no value if it results in a bevy of selfish children who expect mother and father to wait upon their needs. First of all we are serving the Lord, and we must make sure we teach them this and encourage them to learn to discipline themselves from the earliest possible age. Obedience to parents is a "must" if our children are to learn obedience to their Heavenly Father. Discretion in the matter of dress, their choice of friends and pleasures in childhood,

may save heartache in adolescence. The condemnation of Eli the priest concerning his sons, "he restrained them not", is a terrible warning to parents.

It is our greatest desire that our children should be "righteous"; as it is written:

"The father of the righteous shall greatly rejoice: and he that begetteth a wise child shall have joy of him. Thy father and thy mother shall be glad, and she that bare thee shall rejoice."

We are thankful when our children are born whole in body and mind, but our rejoicing is great when they, of their own choice, put on the Saving Name of the Lord in baptism, for then we are returning them to him and they become God's sons and daughters.

A shining light

From Jesus' words and deeds it is obvious that our works should not be confined to our home. For instance, he told us not to hide our lamp under a bushel, a particularly apt illustration, as these two vessels were common to every household and in use every day. Every household needed a lamp and revolved around it when the evenings grew dark; the bushel was the household measure and was in constant use; it was large enough to cover the candle and black out the light, but no one would do such a thing, for candle and bushel each had a separate function to perform. The light in our homes is the Gospel, which influences the life and outlook of all the family and draws them together in unity. We should take care that it is never put out by the busy routine of this life, nor should we think of trying to confine it within our own four walls. Happy, united, loving homes are bound to attract people who cannot fail to see that the family loves e Lord.

When we have begun to learn to serve in our own small home and to break down the demands of self, we begin to experience the true joy of service and fellowship in the Ecclesia, the Lord's family. We rejoice, in spite of our imperfections, in the fellowship of innumerable brethren and sisters with whom we share a common bond and purpose. Our family and home are no longer a little unit within a little house, but part of a great multitude among whom is trust, kindness and unity - a foretaste of the time to come when the seeking and preparing are over and we shall, we trust, find complete fulfilment. We look forward to a glorious and eternal future, when it will no longer take effort to be selfless, for we shall be changed into the likeness of Jesus Christ whom we now strive to follow, and God, the Father, will be "at home" on the earth, re-united with His Family.

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