

Some People Are Truly Different

Plutarch, the ancient Greek historian and philosopher, relates a telling incident: “Alexander the Great, seeing Diogenes looking attentively at a parcel of human bones, asked the philosopher what he was looking for. Diogenes’ reply: ‘That which I cannot find — the difference between your father’s bones and those of his slaves.’” No man would deny that the Philip II of Macedonia, Alexander the Great’s father, was different than his slaves. But neither could any man discover the truly significant differences by examining their physical remains. The only important thing that distinguishes one life from another is spiritual. Whatever other differences there may be, death levels out every last one of them.

Solomon came to the point where he understood this, after making a prodigious search for what it is in life that has any “profit” to it. He was in the unique position of having available to him every possible avenue of pleasure and accomplishment in this world. And having literally tried it all — sensual pleasure, wealth, science, the arts, philosophy and wisdom — this was his disappointing verdict: “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done and on the labor in which I had toiled; and indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind. There was no profit under the sun” (Eccl. 2:11). Why so? Simply because — no matter what the circumstances of a person’s birth, no matter what his natural endowments, no matter what he enjoys in life, and no matter what he accomplishes — earthbound advantages come to an end that is exactly the same for every man. Solomon led a worldly life that was far, far beyond what the common run of mankind will ever know. But even so, he was honest enough to say, “As it happens to the fool, it also happens to me” (2:15). A man may think he has found something “under the sun” that gives him a significant advantage, one that is his to keep — but he will learn the truth that death equalizes every difference except one.

We can even go one step further. If a man never pays attention to the difference that spiritual concerns make, then he may as well have been a beast. At death, the lowliest creature in the animal kingdom will have as much to show for his effort as the human being who has only distinguished himself in worldly ways. “For what happens to the sons of men also happens to beasts; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over beasts, for all is vanity” (3:19). At the end of Ecclesiastes, Solomon pointed to the thing that truly makes one human life different from another. His words are, of course, familiar to many who have not even read the Book of Ecclesiastes: “Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether it is good, or whether it is evil” (12:13,14). One’s spiritual relationship to his Creator determines whether life contains any “profit” at all. This is the factor that counts. Everything else is secondary.

Now, it might be taken for granted that the Christian understands this and builds his life accordingly. We might assume that the disciple grasps the significance of having been “buried with Him through baptism into death” that he might “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4). But Paul, writing to saints, had to put it in the form of a question: “Do you not know . . . ?” We might be confident that members of the Lord’s body, because they are different from other human

beings, are consistently spiritual-minded. But Paul had to put this point in the form of a command: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). The truth is, we sometimes do slip back into the old, worldly way of thinking about “profit” in life. We strenuously spend the bulk of our time pursuing objects that, relatively speaking, ought not to be any more than “rubbish” (Phil 3:8) to us now. Our values and priorities, as our children and our friends know them, are little different than those of the poor soul who is still caught up in the race for “under the sun” advantages. The things that interest us and excite us most are often the things that are purely temporal. We live and work and play as if there were no radical difference that elevates us above the fool, or even the beast. Many of us are in desperate need of the Lord’s forgiveness for failing to be much different inwardly from those who think worldly distinctions are what it is all about.

But I am thankful for having known some individuals in life — brothers and sisters in Christ — who are truly different from other human beings. They see with clear sighted wisdom and love for the Lord what it is in life that matters. They are men and women whose outward lives are in most cases not extraordinary. They know that “not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called” (1 Cor. 1:26). Nevertheless, they are truly in a category apart from all other human beings. They are different because they have actually been “born” a second time. They have genuinely put on the “new man.” And they rejoice in knowing that, whatever else life may hold, “if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17). They have found the single advantage in life that is a man’s to keep. The only one.

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