



THINK ON THESE THINGS

Philippians 4:8

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THE DISTRACTED LIFE

WORRIED AND TROUBLED BY MANY THINGS

By AL DIESTELKAMP

On one occasion when Jesus was the guest of honor in her home, Martha was doing what most godly women would do. She was serving. Her sister, Mary, was not helping her, but instead was sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to Him teach. Finally, Martha had enough and appealed to Jesus to intervene: “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me” (Lk. 10:40).

I don’t know about you, but on the surface that sounds like a reasonable request. Martha was being hospitable while her sister was lounging on the floor. So we may be somewhat surprised at Jesus’ defense of Mary and His mild rebuke directed at Martha.

Once we get over our surprise, we note that the text reveals, “Martha was distracted with much serving.” So Jesus lovingly says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things” (Lk. 10:41). He goes on to say that Mary made a better choice. We are not informed as to just how Martha reacted, or whether this caused her to take her apron off and join her sister at Jesus’ feet.

What is significant to me was the statement about Martha being “distracted.” The KJV uses the word “cumbered,” which is defined as “being over-occupied about a thing” (*Vine’s Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p.261). Clearly, in this situation she was not distracted by evil. She was being distracted (over-occupied) with something that was good.

Being over-occupied with something that is good can cause one to neglect something that is better. One of the problems of many of the scribes and Pharisees that Jesus dealt with was that they were over-occupied with Sabbath-keeping. I think we can safely say

that Jesus kept the Sabbath perfectly, but not to the satisfaction of some. On one occasion Jesus answered the Pharisees who had accused His disciples of doing that “what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath” (Matt. 12:2) by reminding them that under unusual circumstances David and those with him entered the house of God and ate the showbread which under normal circumstances was only to be eaten by priests (vv.3-4).

Later, these detractors asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” (Matt. 12:10), and Jesus answered by asking who among them would not help a sheep that had fallen into a pit on the Sabbath, and then declared “it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (v.12). These Pharisees were so over-occupied with Sabbath-keeping that they didn’t realize that “the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:28).

In another confrontation with some scribes and Pharisees who were so over-occupied with paying tithes—even to the point of tithing their mint, anise and cummin—that they neglected weightier matters such as justice, mercy and faith, Jesus declares “These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone” (Matt. 23:23). Tithing the contents of their spice cabinets was good, but not to the extent that it would distract them from attending to weightier things.

We have to be careful lest we become so over-occupied with good things that we neglect the better things.

Let’s face it! In addition to all the evil that begs for our attention, there is an ever-increasing number of causes and activities which also compete for our active participation. The result is that many of us have cluttered our lives with so many “good” activities and interests that we don’t have time for the weightier matters that will help

us not only in this life, but all the way into eternity.

It is good to work in order to provide financially for our own (see 1 Tim. 5:8), but it is not good to become so over-occupied with working that we become work-aholics and neglect the weightier matters, such as spending time and providing spiritual leadership for our families.

Speaking of spending time together as a family, this too can become a distraction from what is even more important. For instance, it’s good to be able to plan family activities and go on vacations, but we cannot allow ourselves to be so over-occupied with travel and fun that we neglect the more important spiritual responsibilities, including worshiping with other Christians. If this happens we are not only hurting ourselves, but are neglecting our responsibilities toward our brethren.

It is good to make sure our children get a good education so that they can succeed in life, but we must not be distracted by much education to the point where we, like Martha, are “worried and troubled about many things.” Even if a child, were to get the very best secular education, if he is distracted from his spiritual training he will likely be a failure in what is most important.

It’s also good if we’re able to help our children develop culturally, civically or athletically, but not to the point where it distracts them—or us—from what is most important. It’s quite interesting to me that a team coach, or a band director, can insist on participants attending daily practice sessions or rehearsals for weeks on end, and we consider that acceptable even when it hinders the more important spiritual participation.

Clearly, we have more than enough trouble avoiding being distracted by sin, let alone by things that are good.

Mission to Sierra Leone

By **ANDY DIESTELKAMP**

Sierra Leone is a country located on the west coast of Africa seven degrees north of the equator and in the same time zone as London (GMT). It is ten years removed from a decade-long civil war. Estimates vary, but 60 to 75 percent of the population identifies itself as Muslim. It is an economically-depressed country with an unemployment rate estimated to be more 50 percent. As a former British colony, English is the official language of Sierra Leone. While most people there understand varying degrees of English, Krio (a hybrid of native languages and English) is more widely understood. In addition, there are the numerous tribal languages.

In November I (age 49) accompanied Paul Earmhart (80), Sid Latham (45), and Josiah Peeler (25) to the interior city of Bo (city pop. 230,000; district pop. 530,000). We spent three weeks working with numerous people in a variety of contexts.

Of course, many people assume that I went to do what is often called “missionary work.” This terminology has come to mean different things to different people. In many cases, “missionary work” is connected to and overseen by a large organization created by and/or supported by a particular denomination or a number of denominations, independent churches, and other organizations.

The hierarchal and bureaucratic structures of such “missionary societies” can be very complicated and are without any precedent in Scripture. The churches established by the apostles of Jesus Christ did not create other organizations to do their work, nor did they send money to support such organizations. For that matter, churches did not organize themselves into various denominations. Rather, what is simply exemplified for us in Scripture are individual churches of saints, overseen by



local elders and served by deacons (Phil. 1:1), supporting the spread of the gospel (1:5,6; 4:15,16). There is no scriptural reason to complicate this simple arrangement.

Four local churches, independent of any governing body, determined on their own to share with me in helping me to go to do this work. Each of them did its own evaluation of me and the work I was undertaking and supported my efforts. (Several individuals also helped.)

Doing “missionary work” is not that unusual. As I made preparations for this trip and people learned that I was going to Africa, they would tell me that they knew of others who had traveled abroad as missionaries. Yet, when the details of typical “missionary work” are revealed, it is primarily characterized by physical benevolence (medical care, building projects, economic relief, etc.). Perhaps the name of Christ is associated with many of these efforts and some efforts are made to share the gospel, but the focal point and the drawing power of the work is far more physical than it is spiritual. Before we embrace this “social gospel” evangelism as being compassionate or effective in bringing about repentance and salvation, we should compare these methods with what the original evangelists did.

Remember that Jesus’ “great commission” to His apostles was to go into all the world and make disciples (Matt. 28:19). It

was the *gospel* of Jesus Christ that was the power of God to save Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 1:16). Indeed, even in the face of persecution, it was “the word” that people went everywhere preaching (Ac. 8:4). The power was not in their preaching but in the message of Jesus Christ and Him crucified that they preached (1 Cor. 2:1-3).

However, it seems to be popularly believed that the message of the cross is not powerful unless it is first accompanied by physical benefits. This is manifestly contrary to the biblical record. Christianity “turned the world upside down” in the first century not because it addressed people’s physical needs, but because it addressed their spiritual ones. Had I waved a \$100 bill (or other material incentives) in poverty-stricken Sierra Leone, it could have drawn a large crowd. Yet, to attract people with the potential of physical improvement or prosperity and then teach Christ crucified is a contradictory message. To appeal to the flesh only to tell people that they must crucify the flesh is to preach a confusing message.

My mission to Sierra Leone was to preach the same gospel message that the apostles of Jesus Christ preached. In the affluence of our culture, the message that we must be “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20) is largely rejected even by people who call themselves Christians. In the material poverty of Sierra Leone, the message of the cross is more readily received. No wonder Jesus said that it is “hard” for the rich to enter His kingdom (Lk. 18:24,25). How ironic that in our affluence we attempt to make the gospel more attractive to the poor by appealing to them through the flesh with health and wealth, physically attractive buildings and programs, and—in so doing—actually make it “hard” for them to be saved. This is neither compassionate nor the gospel of Jesus Christ.

During our trip five men were attracted to the unembellished but powerful message of the cross of Jesus Christ and were baptized into Him for the remission of their sins. These additions to the small church established in the Messima section of Bo a year ago should significantly strengthen the voice of the gospel there.

In February, six men (Phil Morgan, Rich Gant, Larry Paden, Gale Towles, Mike Radcliff, and Ben Hall) will travel to Bo to ground the saints there and take it to still others. Pray for these men and the saints in Sierra Leone because, as the economy improves there, interest in the pure gospel will almost certainly diminish as it has in our own country.

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When the Vow Breaks

By **KARL DIESTELKAMP**

So reads the title of a two-page article in the November, 2011 issue of AARP Magazine, by Mary A. Fischer. One might assume that this is about divorce, but that would be so only superficially. It promotes something much more sinister.

The lead question reads: "Is infidelity justified if your spouse has dementia?" How do you suppose any faithful Christian would answer that question?

The article introduces us to Herb, 83, whose wife, Ruth, 73, has advanced Alzheimer's disease, leaving their New York apartment to spend the afternoon with his "girlfriend." Herb says, of his wife, "She can't hug or even kiss me anymore," and, "I longed for that closeness with a woman." The article should have been titled, "It's All About Herb!"

While admitting that some caregivers who "crave intimacy" view extra-marital affairs as "a serious moral violation," the AARP article clearly defends those affairs. Fischer writes, "...a new focus on the emotional needs of caregivers has prompted some psychologists, social workers, and even religious leaders to redefine adultery."

A Jewish "rabbi" is quoted as saying, "We're confronted with the challenge of having our religion adapt to these new realities." A "licensed social worker," Cynthia Epstein says, "As long as you provide dignified care and honor your spouse, you need not feel guilty." So much for, "...to love, to honor, to have and to hold...until death do us part." Those who try to change the definitions of adultery and marriage change the gospel of Christ and are "accursed" (Gal. 1:8,9).

Arthur Caplan, director of the center for Bioethics, University of Pennsylvania, said, "I don't think it is abandonment or disloyalty to form a new relationship once your spouse declines to the point where they cannot possibly interact, or respond... you are entitled to seek companionship." *Entitled* "ethics," indeed! This "ethical infidelity" cannot logically be limited to *old* people. What about the Herbs of the world whose spouses are in comas, or are paralyzed from an accident, or have had strokes and are unable to "meet their needs?" Situation ethics lead to no real ethics at all. While our heart goes out to those challenged caregivers, God's ethical standard says, "Let marriage be had in honor among all, and let the bed be undefiled: for fornicators and adulterers God will judge" (Heb. 13:4). *No exceptions!*

Back to Herb. He said, "I'm still a normal male who has needs, and this new relationship has been wonderful." In fact,

the article reveals it is so "wonderful" that "Herb sees a therapist weekly and often discusses his guilt over his affair." If Herb can have one "girlfriend," why not have several. Then his wonderful relationships could overwhelmingly "meet his needs," resulting in boundless joy, in his guilt. Beware of self-serving Herb and his defenders. "But evil men and imposters shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13).

What's next for the Herbs of the world? Will they be willing to participate in the humane euthanasia of the cognitively impaired, helpless stroke victims, and the physically deformed who are "taking up space and using up valuable assets" in care facilities and limiting the personal desires of their spouses and families?

Perhaps they could all gather in a large

plaza somewhere and stand in ranks, shoulder to shoulder with the millions who support and practice the killing of the unborn, and raise their arms and in unison shout, "Heil Hitler!"

God's people do not turn to AARP or any man for our standard of behavior. The apostle John wrote, "We know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in the evil one." Our task is to be different and to make a difference. "For it is God who worketh in you both to will and to work, for his good pleasure...that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom ye are seen as lights in the world" (Phil. 2:13-15).

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Pure and Undefiled Religion?

By **STEVE FONTENOT**

Some "children's homes" have no "orphans" in the sense of "deprived of one's parents" (Walter Bauer's *A Greek Lexicon of the N.T.*). Some years ago I planned a trip to the Tipton's Children's Home in Oklahoma at Christmas time, but did not go, for I was told all the children were gone home for Christmas! These homes sometimes serve as a means to escape personal responsibility to train and provide for children. This is "pure and undefiled religion"?

Children abandoned to institutionalized care are deprived of the love, attention, and care that can only be had in the family as God ordained it. As good as the house-parents may be, there is no substitute equal to God's plan. The personal bond, devotion, and training God intended in the family relationship simply cannot be realized in institutional care, regardless of how good the intents of the founders, contributors, and workers may be. There is no escape from or substitute for the personal responsibility of parents. This is what must be taught to God's people. Lack of that natural love ("unloving," Rom. 1:31, *astorgos*, "a, negative, and *storg*, love of kindred, especially of parents for children and children for parents" *W. E. Vine's Expository Dict. of N.T. Words*) that ought to exist between parents and children is still sin. When children's homes are used as an escape from this personal responsibility, is this "pure and undefiled religion"?

People interested in cancer research may pool their resources in the Cancer Society to provide for cancer research and relief for cancer victims. However, collective work is no escape from personal responsibility. Contributing to the Cancer Society would not relieve an individual from caring for one suffering from cancer, especially if that one was his child or parent. When 1,000 people contribute \$100 (10¢ a person) to a children's or widow's home and consider that the fulfillment of individual responsibility to care for those in distress, and charge those who do not do so with not caring about orphans and widows, is this "pure and undefiled religion"?

Abuses do not, in and of themselves, make a thing wrong. But, children herded together and starved for love and attention, house-parents overloaded with the responsibility of numerous children, all needing individual care, and some with special physical, mental, or emotional problems, lend to a situation ripe for immorality, bitterness, despair, anger, and abuse. If you would like to read one person's sad experience in a children's home and of the abuse suffered there, send me a card at the address below with your name and address and ask for the tract, *Victims of Institutionslism*. There is no charge or obligation. It is a testimony to the failure that is bred by man's effort to substitute for God's plan. What this man received in institutional care was certainly not "pure and undefiled religion."

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MEMBERSHIP SALVATION

By **ROBERT E. SPEER**

While working with the Thayer Street church in Akron, Ohio I responded to a call from a man in a local hospital. Upon my arrival the man said, "I was baptized at Thayer Street Church of Christ in 1928." He could not recall the name of a preacher before or after that year, he could not recall the name of any Christian, and he could not remember when he had last attended a worship service. Still, he savored an affinity for Thayer Street—he had seen a "Church of Christ preacher," and one from Thayer Street at that. Now he felt at ease, conscience assuaged.

One week later I received a call from an elderly woman who proclaimed she "used to attend Thayer Street." My wife and I went to see her and learned four things: (1) she was 97 years of age and her husband was 94; (2) it was the second marriage for both, the first spouse of each having died; (3) she formerly attended Thayer Street "all the time"—until she married her Catholic husband, after which she did not attend at all, "not even once"; (4) She had been married to the second man for 50 years. When I asked for the reason she had sent for me, "Why," she said with rising voice while jabbing the air with a crooked forefinger for emphasis, "I'm 97 years old, and I want to see who is going to conduct my funeral!"

In both of these cases the caller had gained a false sense of security and well

being for having been "baptized" and having been a once-upon-a-time attendee of "the Church of Christ."

While living in Wisconsin we heard of a member of the church who had "just moved" to our city. We called upon her and she was delighted to discover "some real Church of Christ people." When we asked how long she had been in our city we learned that she arrived eight years (yes years!) before. Asked why she did not try to find us in all that time she said she did not wish to offend her unbelieving husband. What of her soul's welfare? Well, she was all right, she thought, because every time she went "down home" she attended "the Church of Christ with Momma."

These are three sad, tragic cases. Could the contempt for and negligence of the Lord and His people be any worse? Well, actually, it can; illustration: I'll use a pseudonym in order to protect the guilty, but the following actually happened.

A disagreement in an unnamed congregation turned into a true disturbance among brethren one Sunday morning. With voices and tempers escalating someone advised that they all go home, cool down, then

come back that evening with a suggested solution. The advice was reluctantly taken. One man, stricken in conscience, was walking throughout his house, pacing back and forth as he wondered what could possibly be done to resolve the matter. Suddenly, wide-eyed and with a broad smile of victory, the man stopped in his tracks. He turned to his wife and exultantly exclaimed, "Elviney, didn't they make me an elder or something down there one time!?!"

Sadly, the first three cases and at least things similar to the last one have been multiplied many times over by people just like them, thinking "down home" membership, past association with "real Church of Christ people," or "got baptized" years ago, is sufficient for security of the soul. It isn't. The psalmist said that at the second coming the Lord will give a shout: "Gather My saints together to Me, those who have made a covenant with me by sacrifice" (Psa. 50:5). Paul said that "now it is high time to awake out of sleep" (Rom. 13:11). Amen!

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