

Happiness Is...

"To make society happy, it is necessary that great numbers should be wretched as well as poor." (Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 1723) What a horrible philosophy! Mandeville's **Fable of the Bees** was, for decades more read than the Bible; yet Mandeville's polished paganism affirms that "private vices are public benefits," and that "every species of virtue is at bottom some form of gross selfishness," more or less modified, or masked. For centuries the poor have had a tough time of it. Some very unjust economic theories have floated around for centuries that prevented aid and a just deal for the needy. The emperor Napoleon who claimed that he could be an atheist in Paris and a Muslim in Cairo, said in words that would have provided fuel for a Marxist style criticism: "No society can exist without inequality of wealth, and inequality of wealth is not possible without religion."

True, religion has not always been considerate of the poor. Unfortunately, institutional churches have often been careful not to disrupt the status quo and supported with Biblical sanctions an ethic quite contrary to the historic evangelical norm of morality. Though recognizing this, we must not forget what has been done by the church and many of her individual members and societies. The negative is overemphasized and the critique on the church's lack of social involvement seems all what is left. The crying need of the poor has been acknowledged centuries ago and criticism she has also received from within her ranks. "The Church," cried St. Bernard in the twelfth century, as he looked at the wonders of splendid Cathedrals and Gothic architecture is resplendent in her walls, beggarly to her poor. She clothes her stones in gold and leaves her sons naked." John Wesley, the great British Revivalist, six centuries later, "was to protest in terms equally eloquent and vehement, against the extravagances of wealth: and that protest he formulated into a very definite doctrine concerning the use and the abuse of money and privilege." He did much to alleviate the needs of the poor. He brought the gospel message in word and deed to the whole person. Wesley taught that all who squander or hoard wealth for self-gratification are "robbing God, continually embezzling and wasting their Lord's goods, and, by that very means, corrupting their own souls." Much has been done by Wesley and his followers.

In every century you find Christians who have forsaken all and with great vision and courage tried to change unjust structures in society. Their heroic and self-sacrificing deeds have largely been forgotten. Only the names of individual leaders still stand out like bright beacons encouraging others to follow their lead. Of course many Christians have been involved in dealing with world, national and social problems. The Bible is clear in its teaching that we have a duty to the starving in war torn countries, to aid refugees wherever they are, to combat social in justice and seek better living circumstances. Just recently fifty influential evangelicals meeting in Chicago hammered out a 473 word social action statement, "A declaration of Evangelical Social Concern." The statement said that "we must attack the materialism of our culture and the misdistribution of the nation's wealth and

services." It is a ringing call to discipleship and a plea to return to Biblical guidelines for living to God's glory in this broken world. God never sanctioned poverty.

The Bible never sanctions material poverty, but it does appreciate the immense value of spiritual poverty. A man, who perceives something of the holiness and righteousness of the Almighty God and acknowledges his inability to please God and to come to Him on his merits, is poor in spirit. When a man thinks much of himself before God he won't make it into the Kingdom. Before his conversion, St. Augustine was proud of his ability, vast knowledge and great intellect. This pride hindered him in his coming to faith in Jesus Christ. It was only after he emptied himself of his pride and surrendered to Christ, that he found God's perfect wisdom in Scripture. Humility and admitting your utter helplessness before God are some of the great Christian virtues.

C. S. Lewis once wrote of his experience,

Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better acting on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.

And of course Jesus' words still stand true for us: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." According to Jesus, happiness is related to spiritual poverty and the heirs of the kingdom are those who know their poverty.

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