

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on January 7, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

On one occasion a scribe came to Jesus to ask, "What commandment is the first of all? Jesus answered, The first is, Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." Then, even though he had not been asked, Christ added, "The second is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31). These two commandments constitute the heart and center of Christianity. They were the guiding principles of Christ's life. They were the heart of what he commanded his disciples. Love God; love your fellowman.

On another occasion Jesus said to his disciples, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another." (John 13:34-35). Yet again Jesus said, "All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, even so do ye also unto them: for this is the law and the prophets." (Matt. 7:12).

In His Steps

Charles M. Sheldon wrote a book, In His Steps, in Topeka, Kansas, back in the year 1896. The book was first published in serial form in a religious journal in Chicago. It was read chapter by chapter to certain Sunday school classes. Because only one copy of the printed book was filed with the copyright office, whereas the requirement is for two copies, the copyright was defective and the book became "public domain." As a result of the fact that the book was royalty free, many publishers became interested in publishing it. Ultimately sixteen American and fifty European and Australian publishers printed the book. Alone one London edition in paperback sold over three million copies. It has been translated into more than twenty-two different languages. According to Publishers Weekly it has had a wider circulation than any other book in history, with the exception of the Bible.

The leading character in the book was Henry Maxwell, who preached for the First Church in the city of Raymond. His church was truly the first church in the city. It had the finest music, the finest preaching, and the finest clientele. Edward Norman, editor of the Raymond Daily News, was one of its members. Alexander Powers, superintendent of the vast railway shops, was also a member. Still another was Donald Marsh, president of Lincoln College, located on the outskirts of Raymond. Yet another was Milton Wright, a leading merchant of the city. There was also a Dr. West, an authority in special surgical cases. Rachel Winslow, a beautiful young woman with an unusually fine voice, was also a member. Virginia Page, an heiress who had inherited over half a million dollars, was also a member. These are just a few who suggest the type of membership that made up this prominent church.

A Shabbily Dressed Man

One Saturday morning Henry Maxwell was putting the finishing touches on his sermon, a sermon entitled "Following Christ," when he was interrupted by a shabbily dressed man seeking a job. He explained to the man how busy he was in preparing the next day's sermon and soon sent him on his way, expressing the hope that the man might find something. The next day, after the congregation had sung hymns which contained the lines,

"Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow Thee," and

"Where He leads me I will follow,

I'll go with Him, with Him, all the way," and after a wonderful sermon, the shabbily dressed man who had been seated far back under the balcony stood up and said, "I've been wondering since I came in here if it would be just the thing to say a word at the close of the service. I', not drunk and I'm not crazy, and I am perfectly harmless, but if I die, as there is every likelihood I shall in a few days, I want the satisfaction of thinking that I said my say in a place like this, and before this sort of a crowd.

"I lost my job ten months ago. I am a printer by trade. The new linotype machines are beautiful specimens of invention, but I know six men who have killed themselves inside of a year just on account of those machines. Of course, I don't blame the newspapers for getting the machines. Meanwhile, what can a man do? I know I never learned but the one trade, and that's all I can do. I've tramped all over the country trying to find something. There are a good many others like me. I'm not complaining, am I? Just stating facts. But I was wondering as I sat there under the gallery, if what you call following Jesus is the same thing as what he taught. What did he mean when he said: 'Follow me!' The minister said that it is necessary for the disciple of Jesus to follow his steps, and he said the steps are 'obedience, faith, love and imitation.' But I did not hear him tell you just what he meant that to mean, especially the last step. What do you Christians mean by following the steps of Jesus?

I'm Not Blaming Anybody

"I've tramped through this city for three days trying to find a job; and in all that time I've not had a word of sympathy or comfort except from your minister here, who said he was sorry for me and hoped I would find a job somewhere. I suppose it is because you get so imposed on by the professional tramp that you have lost your interest in any other sort. I'm not blaming anybody, am I? Just stating facts. Of course, I understand you can't all go out of your way to hunt up jobs for other people like me. I'm not asking you to; but what I feel puzzled about is, what is meant by following Jesus. What do you mean when you sing, 'I'll go with Him, with Him, all the way?' Do you mean that you are suffering and denying yourselves and trying to save lost, suffering humanity just as I understand Jesus did? What do you mean by it? I see the ragged edge of things a good deal. I understand there are more than five hundred men in this city in my case. Most of them have families. My wife died four months ago. I'm glad she is out of trouble. My little girl is staying with a printer's family until I find a job.

"Somehow I get puzzled when I see so many Christians living in luxury and singing, 'Jesus, I my cross have taken, all to leave and follow Thee,' and remember how my wife died in a tenement in New York City, gasping for air and asking God to take the little girl, too. Of course, I don't expect you people can prevent everyone from dying of starvation, lack of proper nourishment and tenement air, but what does following Jesus mean? I understand that Christian people own a good many of the tenements. A member of the church was the owner of the one where my wife died, and I have wondered if following Jesus all the way was true in his case. It seems to me there is an awful lot of trouble in the world that somehow wouldn't exist if all the people that sing such songs went and lived them out. I suppose I don't understand. But what would Jesus do? Is that what you mean by following his steps? It seems to me sometimes as if the people in the big churches had good clothes and nice houses to live in and money to spend for luxuries, and could go away on summer vacations and all that, while the people outside the churches, thousands of them, I mean, die in tenements, and walk the streets for jobs, and never have a piano or a picture in the house, and grow up in misery and drunkenness and sin."

Suddenly, the ragged poorly dressed man gave a queer lurch over in the direction of the communion table and laid one grimy hand on it. His hat fell upon the carpet, as a stir went through the congregation. The doctor half rose from his pew, as the man fell heavily forward on his face, full length in the aisle. He was carried next door to the preacher's house and there he was given what medical attention and care he needed. But already his weakness and exhaustion had gone too far. By the following Sunday he was dead.

A Different Tone

That Sunday morning the preacher spoke with a different tone. There was a different atmosphere in the congregation. When it came time for the sermon the preacher said, "The appearance and words of the stranger in the church last Sunday made a very powerful impression on me. I am not able to conceal from you nor from myself the fact that what he said, followed as it has been by his death in my house, has compelled me to ask as I have never asked before, 'What does following Jesus mean?' I am not in a position yet to utter any condemnation of this people, or, to a certain extent, of myself, either in our Christ-like relations to this man or the numbers that he represents in the world. But all that does not prevent me from feeling that much that the man said was so vitally true that we must face it in an attempt to answer it or else stand condemned as Christian disciples. A good deal that was said here last Sunday was in the nature of a challenge to Christianity as it is seen and felt in our churches. I have felt this with increasing emphasis every day since.

"And I do not know that any time is more appropriate than the present for me to propose a plan or a purpose...What I am going to propose now is something which ought not to appear unusual or at all impossible of execution. Yet I am aware that it will be so regarded by a large number, perhaps, of the members of this church. But in order that we may have a thorough understanding of what we are considering, I will put my proposition very plainly, perhaps bluntly. I want volunteers who will pledge themselves, earnestly and honestly for an entire year, not to do anything without first asking the question, 'What would Jesus do?' And after asking that question, each one will follow Jesus as exactly as he knows how, no matter what the result may be...At the close of the service I want all those members who are willing to join such a company to remain and we will talk over the details of the plan. Our motto will be, 'What would Jesus do?' Our aim will be to act just as he would if he was in our places, regardless of immediate results. In other words, we propose to follow Jesus' steps as closely and as literally as we believe he taught his disciples to do. And those who volunteer to do this will pledge themselves for an entire year, beginning with today, so to act."

What Does This Mean To Us?

At the beginning of 1968, it is an appropriate time for each one of us to make this same resolution. In this audience today there are husbands and wives, parents and children. What differences would it make in our homes if each of us resolved to ask before every action "What would Jesus Do?" In this audience there are students and teachers. What changes would be made in their actions if each should seriously ask the question, "What would Jesus Do?" There are businessmen, salesmen, salesladies, doctors, nurses, servicemen, newsmen, radiomen, and others. What changes would be made in our behavior if each of us would seriously undertake to ask before every action, "What would Jesus Do?"

In anticipation of the suggestion of this hour, I have spoken to you on the past two Sundays on these themes: "We Beheld His Glory," a sermon in which we pointed out the glory that Christ displayed before his disciples in the long ago. His

message, his life, his miracles, and his purpose demonstrated his glory. Then, on the following Sunday our message concerned Christ again as we spoke of the one who is "Through Eternal Years the Same." We have been thinking of Christ in a special way in these recent messages. Now we are asking, "is it not reasonable to suggest that all Christians strive to do just what Christ would do, were he in our places?"

Each of us will need to read the life of Christ devotionally, as it is presented in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Each of us will need to get the spirit of his life as well as the detailed description of how he lived and what he did. Our purpose will be to conform to Christ's way of life in everything that we think, in the words that we speak, and in every action of our lives.

Conclusion

In undertaking this new challenge we will be following a person, whose life was clear, distinct and unforgettable. We will also be following a principle, the principle of love. As we said in the beginning, Christ's way of life is seen in his words, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." And we also add, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Yet again we remember his words, "A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; even as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye have love one to another." Still more, "All things therefore whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye also unto them, for this is the law and the prophets."

As we conclude this message we extend two invitations: First, there is the invitation for every one of us to make a quiet response in his own heart to the challenge of this hour. Hopefully, we believe that each of us has a desire to live his life and to do just what Jesus would do. The second invitation is to those who are not yet Christians. The invitation is to make an open response by obeying the Lord's commands. Confess the name of Christ before men, repent of your sins, and be buried with your Lord in baptism. Then, rise to walk in a new kind of life, in which you follow in the steps of the Lord. May it be that each of us in this audience accepts at least one of these invitations; may it be that some will accept both.
