

VISIBILITY LIMITED

by Lester J. Start

Undated

Luke 12: ;3-21 (The parable of the rich man who would build bigger barns). “But God said unto him, Thou foolish one, this night is thy soul required of thee.”

On the northern slope of one of the Steuben hills facing the long rolling peaks of the Adirondack foothills is a tiny farmhouse. It is an ideal spot to build a home for stretching out before it is a vista that is incomparable, and one can imagine what an inspiration it would be to have this view before him every time he looks' out of the window. A few years ago, however, the old barn which stood behind the house burned down and had to be replaced. But when it was rebuilt, for some strange reason the farmer built it in front of the house instead of behind, and now instead of seeing the view of the mountains as you look from the house, you see a magnificent new barn. The beautiful vista is completely blotted out as the barn looms up blocking the vision of the hills beyond. The visibility of the beyond is limited.

The barn is really a magnificent structure, built according to the most modern methods. From the concrete stanchions to the tightly shingled roof of the mow it is perfectly, constructed to make the best use of the space in the most efficient way. The tile silo at one end is built to last for generations. And the new lightning arresters add a crowning touch to the perfection of the building. One cannot help but admire the building, but still, after one has inspected and admired and then looks out on the view of the mountains, he cannot help but wonder why that farmer built the barn where he did. It could just as well have been moved a hundred feet to the right or to the left, and opened up that outlook over the mountains. The barn is very nice but why put it right there? Why blot out that source of beauty and inspiration which could give those who live there a vision of the beauty of nature and the certain suggestion of God? Why must their visibility be limited?

This situation is a visible and striking example of what happens in the lives of many of us. We may not have barns to build in front of our houses to blot out the view, but in our everyday lives we do what amounts to the same thing. By our preoccupation with daily affairs we have no time or vision with the things of the eternal; we forget that man does not live by bread alone. Like this farmer who was so preoccupied with his cows and crops that he could see nothing but the barn, so our lives are all too often so preoccupied with the necessary details of daily living that we blot out the things of the eternal, the vision of God.

The parable of the rich man who would build bigger barns to hold his substance which was read in the Scripture Lesson gives us a message from the lips of Jesus about this very situation. There was a certain rich man who appears to have come by his wealth honestly enough. He had a good farm and it yielded heavy crops. He was probably a good farmer and added to his wealth by careful work. He did not add to his fields by oppression or cheating. Nor was he a miser and stingy with his money, for he planned to build bigger barns to hold his possessions for the express purpose of retiring and enjoying his wealth. For he tells us: I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. He was a

practical, foresighted businessman who had arrived at a high point of success. He was probably a big man in his community; because of his success people would respect his judgment and admire him. And yet says Jesus, God called him a fool. And He called this man foolish because he failed to make a distinction between himself and his possessions, because he made of his possessions his whole life, and forget that there were other values. He had limited his vision as did the man who built his barn in front of his house thereby blotting out the vision of things beyond. The lives of these two men are absorbed in their livelihood; they make no distinction between the things that are within and the world without. And they do not hear the warning of God :”this night is thy soul required of thee.”

That is the reason why we think it strange and wrong for that man to build his barn in front of his house instead of behind, and why the man who would build bigger barns to hold his possessions was called a fool by Jesus - not just because they showed interest in material things, but because all of their attention was so taken up by the material things outside, they had no concern with what was beyond these things or within their souls. Their vision was limited and they could see only things. It is not because the possessions themselves are necessarily an evil. When Jesus told the rich young man who wanted to inherit eternal life, to sell all and follow Him, he was no, I think, putting forth a universal rule; rather he was setting down an individual prescription. The anathemas of most moralists and religionists against wealth are usually misguided, thoughtless, and insincere. The act remains that we inhabit a material world and live in a realm of things. We live in a world of matter as well as one of spirit, and a wise religion will not ignore either Team?? Of the duality. Possessions to some degree are a necessity to man’s freedom. But if one is so concerned with the things, his soul is bound to suffer from neglect, and who knows but that this night thy soul is required of thee. The result of such preoccupation is that one suffers from intellectual and spiritual inertia. And all the possibilities subsisting within become stolen through preoccupation with what is without.

This is why we object to the man building his barn where it blotted out the view of the mountains. This means that all the multitudinous messages of earth and sky and hills and trees move unseen and unheard by this man; his eyes and ears were closed to anything beyond the barn. And so the rich man in Jesus’ parable could not see beyond his possessions. As a result, he died while he yet lived, for although he still walked and breathed he could not see the deeper values which make life worthwhile. As a tree sometimes dies from the top down, so they died to the significance of the things about them. The woodland flecked with leafy light and shade find them blind. The beauty of the stars leave them unmoved. The mystery of the growing season means nothing more than crops to them. God in the beauty of nature has no witness here. These men are doomed by the apt words of Rudyard Kipling “and because we know that we have breath in our mouth and think we have thought in our head, we shall assume that we are alive, whereas we are really dead”.

The result inevitably, then, of such a point of view toward life is to develop a spiritual and intellectual inertia which is in the long run fatal to a happy and useful life. We can see clearly the menace of materialism in the world at large today. The menace does not lie so much in the fact that we are concerned with material things but that this is the extent of our interest and we leave no room for anything else. No one would wisely suggest that we turn back the clock and live as

our forefathers did, the simple life devoid of the benefit of modern invention. It would be foolish to leave the power loom for the spinning-jenny or the tractor in favor of the hand-plough or the automobile for the ox-cart. These things must not be lost. But we must keep up with these developments with a corresponding development intellectually and spiritually; we must redeem our moral and spiritual "lag" and keep pace with our material developments. We must widen our vision to see the true basis of values.

Increasing material powers are not safe except with a proportionately improving character. A drunken man afoot may be dangerous, but the danger is multiplied a hundred fold if the man is permitted to drive a car. If a man is angry he may be able to do a great deal of damage with his two fists; but how much more he can do if he is armed with guns or bombs. Thus enlarged powers of materialism spell enlarged peril if the soul does not grow in power to keep up with the material power. If the soul lags behind the advance of the body, the advance of the body will be destroyed. If the world without takes the bit in its teeth in mad flight and drags the world within bruised and bleeding at the end of entangled reins, the runaway must be stopped until the driver can take new control. Society can endure for a time without new inventions and improvements, but it is very doubtful how long it can endure without a better spirit. When livelihood absorbs life, when the without breaks contact with what is within and destroys it, then the day darkens in folly.

The progress we see in invention is not something we can put our

trust in unless we can keep up with it by a corresponding progress in spirit. we cannot assume that all things move onward and upward to a great and glorious goal automatically; the old easy optimism has been rudely shaken out of us in the stirring and stormy years of the last decade. The fact of the matter is that man has an inveterate capacity for sinking just when it would seem that the opportunity for progress is best. Let men come down from the wilderness of the mountains into the rich river beds where the good pasture grows, and soon they settle down to a life of ease and sloth and slavery. The first generation may produce a Joseph but under his shadow the rest lie supine. Let men live in some sea-girt island protected from their enemies and what do they care for the rest of the world? Content with their possessions and what they call security, they are blind to the world. Let science teach them how to make great machines and their manhood seems to shrivel beside their inventions. We are little greater for all our wonderful appliances in this twentieth century if we have gained them at the expense of our strength of spirit. When we cross the ocean on great floating cities, it is questionable whether we are just as vital men as the Vikings who faced the stormy Atlantic in their frail craft generations ago. If we have wealth we luxuriate, if poverty we hug our chains. Let nature give us narcotics for the assuaging of pain and we become slaves to drugs. Let freedom be given and it becomes low license. Give man religious freedom paid for with the blood of sacrifice and it becomes religious indifference.

This is what progress means if it is only in one direction; if our vision is centered on materialism and we cannot see beyond to other values. Without a vision of the beyond we lack purpose and without purpose we do not step onward and upward, but downward and backward.

This is an idea that is not at all unfamiliar to us today; we are constantly being reminded that the ills of the world are due in part at least to some such cause as this. We know this and yet we don't quite know what to do about it. We can at least recognize the situation and be prepared to think intelligently about it, even if we feel inadequate to change it. But in our own lives we can see that the barns we must build do not blot out the other values in life which are so important; we can take stock of our own situation and see whether we are putting such importance on our barn that we cannot see beyond it to the wider values of God. We can place these material values that the barn symbolizes in a position where it will not take up our whole attention.

Different sermon??

Perhaps an illustration will serve to make this clearer. A minister who believed in putting his religion to work in practical affairs became interested in helping a boy whom he met on the streets begging. The minister saw that if the dirt that caked the boy's face were removed and if the rags he was wearing were changed in for some decent clothes the boy would be an attractive looking lad. He was a bright and intelligent youngster too, the minister discovered as he talked with him. The minister decided therefore to put his Christian principles to work and help this boy in an effort to give him a chance in life. He began by buying the child some dinner and then bought him some new clothes. The boy said that he had no home so the minister made arrangements for a place to live for him. He did everything that was in his power to help the boy on. He got him started in school, kept him supplied with the things that he needed and felt that he was doing a service of God in helping this homeless waif, get along in an unfriendly world. This is such a pleasant story because of the noble efforts of this minister that we would expect a happy ending and learn that this poor orphan became an important and useful member of society. But this is not what happened. It was not long before the minister found out that the boy was not attending school regularly -it was almost impossible to get him to Sunday school but worse yet he did not seem to show any gratitude to his benefactor and kept doing the things that he knew were wrong. He would not learn to tell the truth, and he still found the streets more attractive than a pleasant home. And even though he was given what he needed, whenever he had a chance he would put on old clothes and go back on the streets begging for money. Things went from bad to worse until the minister finally realized that the boy wanted the gifts of this good man but he was not willing to live up to the obligations on him to use these to the best advantage. He simply did not want to be good. And so the minister reluctantly arranged for him to attend a school for correction where kindness would be tempered with discipline.

All too many of us are like this boy. We have the opportunity and advantages that will enable us to lead a better life more in accordance with the will of God. We have been given the opportunity and the means to lead the good life as Jesus would have us, but we simply are not interested in doing this - we don't want to go in this direction. We want to share in all the advantages; we want to think that we shall inherit eternal life, but we are not willing to do what we should do ourselves to insure this. We are not willing to carry out our obligations and lead the life we should lead.

Fill? we are seeking the wrong values

There is another mistaken notion which we hold in relation to this question of salvation. We seem to think that it is brought about automatically by our intentions. We don't realize that it is a process which takes time and effort. Illustration of girl taking music lessons to be equal to her loved one. It is a sort of feeling of exaltation sometimes with no foundation - evangelists getting saved at every camp meeting (toss tobacco out the window and then get it). There is something to be done all the time.

[This salvation comes through the power of Christ in us which we get from a mystical union. Theology of Paul (how Christ changes life - violin) Toscanini illustration Greek life of religion not concerned with morals

Secular life of today not concerned with morals.]

It seems to me that too many of us are like this young man. We feel the need of that which Jesus promises us; we want to tap that divine source of power which those whose confidence is in God feel, but we are not willing to do anything on our own part to bring about the situation we desire. Jesus' answer to the young man comes to us today in this story; sell all and follow me; put all your trust in God instead of doing it that way. Jesus' requirement is an absolute requirement; we cannot serve God and Mammon. We must decide to put all our loyalty on one or the other. Jesus tells us that the requirement is all, or nothing at all.

We don't like this severe requirement, and yet we want to feel that we merit salvation. We are caught on the horns of an unpleasant dilemma, but we have figured out a neat way to solve our problem so that we can have our cake and eat it at the same time. We feel that we may inherit the kingdom of God and still not follow the requirements laid upon us by believing that our salvation comes to us through the crucifixion of Jesus alone. We enjoy it vicariously because of his triumph over evil; it is external to our own efforts and we feel that we have nothing to do with it. We have magnified a single aspect of the doctrine of the Atonement to such an extent that this seems to be the total picture of salvation. We explain it this way: On the one hand we have a picture of a perfect God and on the other hand sinful man. How can there be any union of the two? How can man rise above his sinful nature to the perfection of God? He knows what he should do for the most part but he does not have the power to do it. In the words of Paul, The good that I would, I do not; but the evil which I would not, that I do. In order to bridge this gap between the sinfulness of man and the perfection of God, God sent his only begotten Son to live in the flesh as

The man Jesus. Jesus met the evil forces of the world of flesh and conquered them. He took on the sin of man and was victorious over it; the final victory came when he was nailed to the cross and the scoffers shouted as they mocked him, "Now then, O man of God, where is thy God to save thee?" He conquered even over death, for he appeared again to his followers and he is present today to those who would look for him. Thus Jesus' sacrifice becomes a basis for our salvation; through his suffering and victory he pays for the sins of man and through him man is redeemed.

But this is not the complete story. Jesus' sacrifice gives us a basis for salvation but the rest is up to us - we must begin from here. Jesus' sacrifice is not enough in itself - this gives us the starting point only. We cannot say that this alone assures us salvation, that we have no obligations on our part in the process much as we would like to. Through our faith in Christ we can now become empowered to do that which we should do and avoid the evil that we would not. Through our union with the spirit of Christ we are empowered to lead Christ-like lives. This is the requirement that we cannot afford to ignore, for this is essential. We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that we have no responsibility, no part to play - that everything is being done for us out of the love of God and that we may contently sit back with the comfortable assurance that everything has been taken care of. We must follow the teachings of Jesus and through the power of Christ do that which is required of us. The spiritual life of salvation is not in the misty future; it is a life lived here and now according to the spirit of Christ - and we must lead this life if we are to inherit the kingdom of God. For as Jesus tells us, "Not everyone that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."