

WORK AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

AN ADDRESS BY

DR. CHARLES MALIK

The following is a keynote address given by Dr. Charles Malik at a conference hosted by Manhattan's Riverside Study Center in New York City on May 8, 1982.

I never feel as happy, as free, as myself, nay beyond myself, outside myself, as I do in the company of fellow Christians. Jesus Christ, my friends, makes all the difference. In his presence, who will be afraid to open his heart to the full, who will not be granted the power to see and articulate thoughts and feelings and truths that he can never see and articulate otherwise? Who will not simply let go, letting Jesus Christ's Holy Spirit take hold of him, and then rivers of living waters will flow from him? They will not flow from him, but from the Holy Spirit himself, through him.

I salute you as fellow followers of Christ. No matter how much you may differ from other Christians, in traditions, in forms of life and worship, even in certain theological beliefs, it is enough that you love Jesus Christ, that you confess him publicly, unabashedly, unstammeringly, as God, Lord and Saviour – and that you belong to the Church, and love it, and serve it, and believe in it, and cling to it. So I feel happy and free and full of joy in being with you here today. One moment of pure Christian fellowship in the Holy Ghost is worth an eternity of time in the world.

The title, "Work and the Spiritual Life," already means that we have two distinct things: work and the life of the spirit. The spirit here obviously means not any spirit, but the spirit of Jesus Christ. Therefore the real title is "Work and the Christian Spiritual Life." People are, these days, ashamed of Jesus Christ. They don't mention him. They mention all sorts of things but not him. He offends. He disturbs. Therefore the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth is often covered up by such terms as moral principles, Christian ideals, and expressions of that order. But the name itself is almost never mentioned: it is almost always averted – and consciously so. And yet I cannot overstress the importance of "the name" in Holy Scripture.

Why people shy away from the name of Jesus Christ and cover it up is a great question. And I invite you to inquire as to why that is the case. In fact, the answer to the question, why we shy away from names, including above all the name of Jesus Christ, will reveal to you more than half of the problems of this age. The question, then, is: How do we maintain the integrity of our Christian spiritual life in the midst of our work, whatever that work may be?

The real question

The real question – in which there is no evasiveness whatsoever – is the following: How do we maintain our closeness to the crucified, resurrected and glorified Jesus Christ of Nazareth, in the midst of our work in the world, when both our work and the world keep distracting us from him all the time?

Now a word about work. Well, work is obviously human work, not animal work; and the difference between the two is that in the work of man you have a new element which is lacking in the work of animals, namely, mind, theory and art (techné) as distinct from nature. And the first requirement of human work as determined by mind, theory and art is the perfection of the technique of that kind of work. That means for a doctor to be a good doctor, and for an engineer to be a good engineer, and the same for an artist, an author, a statesman and a philosopher.

Intellectual work is as much work as technical or professional or manual work. The first requirement, then, is to seek the perfection of our own kind of work. And only as we acquire that perfection do we “perfect” what is called the dignity of man, the honor of man, man’s own virtue.

Now it is not permissible that you receive a letter from the White House, signed by the President of the United States, in which there is a mistake in spelling. I have such a letter.

When I speak of dignity and honor, I mean that the unemployed suffers in his sense of dignity and self-respect. So there is a diminution of human dignity whenever there is unemployment, whenever people have nothing to do. Then what do they feel? They feel they are not wanted; nobody has any need or care or use for them. And nothing hurts, nothing wounds you to the quick, more than this feeling that you simply are not wanted, that your presence or absence makes no difference to the world.

You love man; all right, then make him feel that he is wanted, that he is of some use, that he will be missed in the nonexistence, that somebody cares for him, wants him around, gives him something to do, assigns him a function. You love man; fine, then provide him with a job. And the word job here is not meant in the sordid economic sense – that he is a machine, a tool, and you use him – but in the deepest spiritual sense of the world needing him. The most miserable man is the unneeded man. And to Jesus Christ no man is unneeded, because he created him as an immortal being.

Basic ideas

And so about work in general the four basic ideas to keep in mind – and this applies to every one of you who has a work and is not unemployed – are the following: Perfect your art or profession by mastering its theory and practice; secondly, believe that perfection is possible; thirdly, fight every tendency to sloppiness; and fourthly, make yourself needed and help others to become themselves needed.

Now as we turn to the second aspect, which is what is meant by Christian work. Of course everything I said so far about work applies to everybody: the Christian or the non-Christian, the atheist or the Hindu or the Moslem or the agnostic. All of them, so far as work is

concerned, must have these four aims in mind. But when we speak of Christian work we are not speaking of something vague and general and ideal, but something very specific, namely, the Christian worker himself. It is the worker, who is a Christian, who is at the center of our thought. And to him, the formulation I have just spelled out applies in full measure. How do I, as a Christian, maintain my closeness to the crucified, resurrected and glorified Jesus Christ of Nazareth – not any Jesus Christ, but Jesus Christ of Nazareth – in the midst of my work in the world, when both my work and the world distract me from this imperative, from being close to him all the time? This is the problem.

I am therefore assuming that if there are lawyers here, they are perfect lawyers; if there are typists here, they are perfect typists; if there are engineers here, they are perfect engineers. I am assuming all that. But if you happen to be also Christian, then your real problem is the one I have just formulated. A Christian, my dear friends, work or no work, perfection or no perfection, cannot live without Jesus Christ. And yet both our work and the world keep distracting us from Jesus Christ, keep causing us to forget him. This is the tragedy of the Christian in the world: this is alas part of original sin.

The temptation of forgetting

Have you pondered deeply enough the role of forgetting God and Jesus Christ in the Bible? Just as there is a tremendous emphasis upon the name, so there is an equally tremendous emphasis upon the tendency, the sin, the temptation of forgetting. “Bless the Lord, O my soul: and all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits; Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; Who healeth all thy diseases; Who redeemeth thy life from destruction; Who crowneth thee with lovingkindness and tender mercies; Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (Psalm 103:1-5).

These are among the benefits of Jesus Christ upon us, my dear friends; and yet the world and our work make us forget both him and them. This forgetting is the most awful thing in our lives. It is probably the greatest sin, far greater than breaking any one of the Ten Commandments.

In the world and in our work, even, indeed especially if our work were perfect, I ask: How do we forget God and Jesus Christ, how are we not close to them, how are they not close to us, how are we far from the Holy Spirit, how are we not filled with the Holy Spirit? In the world and in our work, all these awful things befall us in five different ways:

First, because we get absorbed in our work, completely absorbed in it; and we consider that a great virtue – and, indeed, in a sense, it is. Our work fascinates us, we are spellbound by it, it is marvelous, we like it. We get absorbed in our work and therefore we forget the Holy Trinity.

Second, because our work bewitches and seduces us and we begin to worship it, than which nothing is worse so far as the Old Testament is concerned. “I am the Lord thy God... Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God...” (Exodus 20:2-5). The clever philosophers, such as Bertrand Russell and others, laugh at God calling himself a jealous God, but they have no idea of the importance and depth of the jealousy of God. And yet we bow and serve these other gods. We go – again to quote the Old Testament – we go a whoring after them. What are these other gods? The works of our own hands, the tools and contraptions we make, the products of our own minds, the possessions we have gathered, the money we have amassed-how much we love these things, how much we worship them, and we bow down and serve them; and not only that, but we gloat in our heart over how clever and great and powerful we are, what geniuses we are in our accomplishments All that is idolatry, all that is a whoring, all that is forgetting.

Infinite distractions

Third, because the temptations and distractions of the world today are virtually infinite: the excitements, the pleasures, the kicks, the enjoyments, the delectable delights, the challenges, the possibility with the available technological devices of doing and getting away with almost everything including murder. In the world, my dear friends, we hardly live in the fear of the Lord. And yet God tells us, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom.” So distracted are we, so much on the go are we all the time, that we hardly think of and believe in a hidden Judge who judges not only every act of ours but every “imagination of the thoughts of our heart.”

“But I say unto you,” said Jesus, “that every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment” (Matthew 12:36). Think of it, incredible, staggering! Every idle word that we speak we shall give account thereof in the day of judgment! Do we believe in this? I did not say it: He said it. In fact, I did not know at all about it until He had said it. Do we honestly carry the burden of the fear that for every idle word we speak – let alone for every vain “imagination of the thoughts of our heart” – we shall be held accountable in the day of judgment?

Fourth, because we live for the most part only in this world and for this world. This is why we forget. We have so many real, exciting challenges that we think by accomplishing them we shall usher in heaven on earth. All of you, without exception, my dear friends, are working only for this life. The real heaven, the heaven altogether beyond, the New Jerusalem not arising from the earth but descending from heaven itself – who believes in this, who takes all this seriously, who talks about this any more? Virtually all sermons today stress the earth,

hardly even heave, stress “the here,” hardly ever “the hereafter.” You are gathered here in order to deliberate and plan for your work, your Christian work, in the world. In this respect there is no difference between the Marxists and the Christians: both are bent on creating by their own efforts heaven on earth, both believe that the heaven they are creating on earth – the heaven of what they call social justice, peace, plenty, fulfillment, and so forth –, the Marxist heaven, say in Russia and China, and the Christian heaven, say in Europe and America (to the extent that there is real Christian faith in these continents), is everlasting; not knowing that even if they succeed in creating it, which they are not going to because of the rottenness of the human heart, still, as Peter said, “The heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word (of God) are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men” (II Peter 3:7). And this word of God is none other than Jesus Christ the crucified, the resurrected and glorified and Lord, whom we tend to forget completely in our total preoccupation, each one of us, with the exciting task of creating ourselves, by our unaided powers, the utopia of our dreams.

The influence of the university

Fifth, because the great universities – and this is most important – have swerved from their original self-grounding in Jesus Christ. The atmosphere in the great universities is on the whole hostile to Jesus Christ, and I know what I am talking about. They have delivered themselves almost entirely to rationalism, scientism, humanism, materialism, relativism, immanentism, and, at least by presupposition and implication, to atheism. The influence of the university today permeates, directly or indirectly, all other institutions – the ideas and fundamental attitudes it inculcates dominate the world. And these ideas and attitudes are calculated to distract us away from Jesus Christ, and therefore to cause us to forget him and God and the Holy Spirit. How can we remember him when all that is left of him in the sciences and the humanities is to date our dissertations, publication and correspondence by the year of his birth?!

Here, then, are the five ways in which both our work and the world conspire to cause us to forget God, Christ and the Holy Ghost: (1) we get completely engrossed in our work and we “fall in love” with it. (2) We worship the products of our mind and hands. (3) The world has enabled us to get away with almost anything. (4) Everybody now – the church and the Christians included – is seduced with the impossible task of humanly creating heaven on earth, and therefore of losing sight altogether of the real heaven beyond, the heaven promised us with total assurance not by the questionable fantasies of men but by the wholly reliable word of the Son of Man. (5) The rationalism, humanism, relativism and immanentism of the most influential institution in the world, the university, leave hardly any room for even the thought of Jesus Christ and the Spirit.

You are called to bring Jesus Christ to the marketplace, to 42nd Street, and the marketplace and 42nd Street to Jesus Christ. All power to you. But you can never do that from within the world. The marketplace, 42nd Street, our work in the world, all are essentially hostile to Jesus Christ, because they make us forget him for the reasons I indicated. Never expect Jesus Christ to hail you from the world, from 42nd Street.

And here I want to read you the passage from Genesis 6, part of which I quoted above. It is one of the most telling passages in the entire Bible. It appears just before the Flood. This is how it reads: “And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Genesis 6: 5-8).

A delusion of progress

The phrase “every imagination of the thoughts of his heart” haunts me every day. The juxtaposition of these three words, imagination, thoughts and heart, is simply incredible. The Bible here is speaking not only about man before the Flood, but to you and me now long after the Flood. My friends, I fear that “the imagination of the thoughts of our heart” is now as “only evil continually” as then, and that our “wickedness” is as “great as the earth” now as that of our ancestors before the Flood. And there are still men today who delude themselves that there has been progress in these final things! And while “it represented the Lord that he had made man on the earth” then, and wanted to wipe him out of existence altogether (and his wickedness was so “great” that it overflowed upon the poor beasts and the fowls and the creeping things, with the result that God determined to wipe them all out with him too), do you know why he seems to continue to tolerate us now although we are no better than our ancestors then? Only because of the grace and the merits of Jesus Christ whom nevertheless we continually forget and whose name we are often embarrassed to mention. Noah, who then “found grace in the eyes of the Lord,” is only a prefigurement of Jesus Christ. We, and all mankind, are kept alive today only thanks to Jesus Christ. This is the faith of the saints, this is the dogma of the church.

You can help the world, my dear friends, only from outside the world, only if you are already permanently rooted and grounded in something wholly other than the world, than the marketplace, than 42nd Street. And this can only be the crucified, resurrected and glorified Jesus Christ of Nazareth and his holy Church. How to maintain our integrity, our closeness to Jesus Christ, is our real problem; on it every other thing depends.

I venture to put before you six simple ideas. There is nothing new about them. You know them already very well. The only novelty about them is that I am calling your attention to them on this occasion, stressing the necessity of your making a strenuous effort through them to be able to be as close to Jesus Christ as possible in your work and in the world. I believe they are absolutely indispensable conditions for the full, creative, authentic, Christian life of the spirit.

Reading the Bible

The first is daily Bible reading. You say you have no time; I know you have no time, but that is the problem and it must be overcome; therefore you must create time. There is nothing, nothing as important for each one of us as to spend some time every day on the holy word of God. We go to the mailbox every morning to find out, with expectation and sometimes with anxiety, what awaits us in the mail that morning. But there is a mail awaiting us every morning from heaven. We should seek and feed on it; and that is the Holy Bible. I beg you to create time for this heavenly mail.

Second, prayer, ardent prayer, quiet, stillness: "Be still and know that I am God." Contemplation, being lost in wonder and ecstasy.

Third, circles of joyful fellowship and discussion in the Holy Spirit. Circles of four or five or slightly more. The joy of friendship, fellowship, koinonia, ekklesia. On a daily basis if possible. Again you say you have no time; again you say you have to work to earn your living; well, this is the problem.

Fourth, thirty great intellectual and spiritual classics which you should be reading all the time. Certainly they should include Plato, Aristotle, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, the homilies of St. John Chrysostom, the works of St. Augustine, some of the works of St. Thomas. You should have these works on your shelf all the time. And you should be steeped in them, and feel the strength of the companionship of these tremendous souls throughout history.

Fifth, active, costly participation in the life of the church: its feasts – wonderful feasts – its liturgy (including above all confession and holy communion), its ritual, its ceremonies, its worship, its song and music, its fasts—all these are given us from outside the world, to keep us close to Jesus Christ of Nazareth, to remind us of him.

And sixth, acquainting ourselves with what is happening in the Christian communities all over the world. How many of you know, and how much do you know, of what is happening to the Christians of Russia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe, India, China, Egypt, North Africa, and all over the world? It is most important, if you do not want to forget God and Jesus Christ, to know what is happening to the Christian communities the world over.

The ultimate difference

And finally – and this is very important – what is the real, ultimate difference between the Christian and the non-Christian? Not, I daresay, that the Christian is happier than the non-Christian: the non-Christian may be happier than he. Not, I daresay, that the Christian has no problems, and the non-Christian is not free of problems which weigh on his soul: the Christian may have many more problems than the non-Christian. In neither of these respects is the Christian different from the non-Christian. How much poor old Augustine emphasized this point! The real, ultimate difference is that the Christian lives in hope, based on a promise – the hope of eternal life. The non-Christian nobody has promised anything, and therefore he lives without hope. Knowing the fact of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, believing in the reality and actual existence of heaven, of eternal life, of life everlasting, in the very presence and under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and expecting, yearning and watching for the Second Coming of Jesus Christ – this is the distinctive hallmark of the Christian “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable” (I Corinthians 15:19). If you are working only for this earth, and for this life and 42nd Street, you are of all men most miserable. This is how Paul shouted to the Corinthians. And this shout must ring in our ears every day.

And another shout by the same man must also ring in our ears every day. And it is this: “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (I Timothy 1:15). These two shouts of Paul the Christian should remember every hour, 24 times a day, including his dreams.

Our earth turned into heaven but without Christ is still hell. And hell itself with Christ is heaven. The Communists do not understand that. The humanists do not understand that. The believers only in science and progress do not understand that. The idealists and utopians do not understand that. Those who are working only for this life and this earth do not understand that. And therefore they will all come to grief. But not the Christians. “For we know whom we have believed” (I Timothy 1:12).