

Surviving Vanity Fair

When the Roll is Called Up Yonder – Part V

Romans 16:19-20

Introduction

- Do you know what caused Jessica Simpson's marriage to break up?
- Do you know what Paris Hilton wore at the last party?
- Do you know what Brad Pitt said about Angelina in Africa?

You don't?!

If you have been to the grocery store lately, you have seen these headlines. It is all there. Of course, you have to open the cover to find the answers – which I did not do. It is all there, though, including amazing stuff on how to double your retirement in one year and lose fifty pounds in your sleep.

Some interesting titles that have been in print in the last thirty days – available at grocery stores near you – include:

- America's Latest Illegal Immigrants are Vampires!
- Judge Who Barred Witches from Adopting Children is Turned into Guinea Pig!
- Housewife Experiences Half-rapture and Gets Stuck in the Dining Room Ceiling!
- Credit Card Explodes When Gal Goes Over Limit!
- U.S. Currency Accidentally Printed with Disappearing Ink! Spend it while you can!
- UFO Aliens Abducted My Cat! Felix now has the gift of ESP, says amazed owner. At least the cat is now good for something – okay, I added that last part!

Do you know what the frightening thing about this is, to me? These magazines and tabloids are on the counter by the checkout lane because people are – what? People are buying them!

Are people this gullible? Do they really care about this latest news and the latest UFO abduction?

I took my daughter and her friend to the State Fair this past week. We stayed until the fireworks were over and had a great time. I ate a deep fried Snickers – all by myself. It is a Snickers bar on a stick that is rolled in batter, deep fried, and then sprinkled with powdered sugar. The Snickers bar melts on the inside. It was worth the trip!

I go to the fair to eat stuff like that. I also go to watch people.

The scary thing is realizing that the same people who paid money to see the bearded lady and the half boy- half animal are the same people who are going to vote in next month's election and are going to choose the next President of the United States. That is frightening!

Most of you, I would assume, did not pay to see the bearded lady and, I hope, do not buy the latest tabloids or magazines to be filled in on the latest scoop in our silly, sensual, gullible, self-centered, sinful world.

In the classic book by John Bunyan, entitled *Pilgrim's Progress*, young Pilgrim is journeying toward the Celestial City, which is a picture of heaven in this allegory. He encounters all sorts of difficulties as he leaves his hometown, called the City of Destruction, and journeys toward the Celestial City. Along the way he gets caught in the Slough of

Despond, is briefly imprisoned in Doubting Castle, and escapes from the Giant Despair.

This book was written in 1678, after John Bunyan, who was a preacher, was put in jail for holding unauthorized religious services outside the Church of England. While in jail, Bunyan began composing this classic work that has now been printed in over one hundred languages.

In one scene, Pilgrim has to walk through a town called Vanity Fair, with all its pleasures and enticements and temptations. Frankly, I never go to the State Fair without thinking of Vanity Fair in Pilgrim's Progress. However, Vanity Fair was not a place of scary rides or deep fried Snickers or places where 4-H cattle and sheep are judged, along with quilts and cakes.

Vanity Fair was a city that represented the world of those who hated God and the Celestial City – or heaven. Vanity Fair had one purpose for existence – it offered the travelers who came through, anything and everything sinful that would entice them to forget about God and their journey to the Celestial City.

Pilgrim's companion, named Faithful, is eventually murdered by the citizen's of Vanity Fair. They are enraged because Faithful brings an indictment on their way of life by his pure and holy testimony.

After Faithful is martyred, Pilgrim is allowed to leave. He is then helped along by a companion named Hopeful. Eventually, after many adventures and trials, Pilgrim, whose name is changed to Christian after encountering the gospel of Jesus Christ, arrives at the Celestial City.

There is truth to this allegory by John Bunyan. In fact, you should read the book, if you have not. Put down the tabloids and pick up this treasure.

The truth is, at this moment, we are all passing through Vanity Fair. Will it detain our progress? Has it distracted our attention?

How do we survive Vanity Fair? How do we keep from paying more attention to the false promises of Vanity Fair than the lasting pleasures of God?

Warning – Watch Out for Depraved Culture!

In Romans chapter 16, the apostle Paul tells us how to survive Vanity Fair. He has interrupted his final greetings with a series of warnings.

Paul is deeply concerned that the Christians in Rome not be deceived by false teachers who promise them the trinkets of health and wealth and self-fulfillment and self-satisfaction. These teachers

preach a religion of satisfaction in self – and not the gospel of salvation from self.

Beware of these smooth talking teachers – these “chrestologia” – promising a religion of self-satisfaction rather than self-denial. They are like the false teachers described by Jude,

They are . . . clouds that never deliver rain . . . trees that never produce nourishing fruit. (Jude 1:12 paraphrased)

Watch out for deceiving teachers!

Secondly, Paul warns the believers to watch out for depraved culture.

Notice Romans 6:17-18, which we studied in our last discussion,

Now I urge [beg] you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.

Now notice Romans 16:19a,

For the report of your obedience has reached to all; . . .

Earlier, by the way, Paul commended the Roman believers, when he wrote,

. . . because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. (Romans 1:8b)

Now Paul commends them because their obedience is known by everyone. He is referring, no doubt in this context, to their obedience to the truth of Christ.

Paul writes further in Romans 16:19,

. . . therefore I am rejoicing over you, . . .

In other words, “I am so happy about your testimony.”

Any teacher who hears that one of his Bible study students took a stand for Christ; took a stand for the truth of scripture will be thrilled. We rejoice when Christians are obedient to their namesake!

Yesterday, I went to the grocery store to pick up a few items. I noticed that the teenage guy who bagged my groceries had a cross on a chain around his neck – it was out and on top of his tee-shirt. There were no other customers in line, so knowing I would not keep him from doing his job, I asked, “Why do you wear that cross around your neck?”

I thought, assuming it was just a piece of jewelry to him, I would have an opportunity to witness to him. However, it turned out that he was committed to living for Christ. This teenager said, “I wear it because whenever I'm tempted to cheat or steal or lie

or do something wrong, usually at some point, I have to look down and I'll see this cross and think, 'Oh yea, wait a minute, I'm a Christian – I can't do that.'"

I found out he attends a church in a nearby town that is pastored by a friend of mine. My friend would have been incredibly proud of this young man's testimony.

Paul writes, in Romans 16:19, "I am rejoicing over you because of your testimony of passionate obedience to Jesus Christ."

Practice purity (be wise in what is good)

This, however, does not keep Paul from delivering another warning. He knows these believers are living in Rome – the Vanity Fair of Vanity Fairs – so he continues in Romans 16:19, and says,

... but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

"Be wise," or "sophos," which gives our name Sophia, means, "to be learned; skillful in what is good".

James writes,

... wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. (James 3:17)

James contrasts this with the wisdom of the world, as he writes,

... which ... is earthly, natural, demonic. (James 3:15)

He says worldly wisdom produces,

... selfish ambition in your heart, ... arrogance [which] lies against the truth. (James 3:14 paraphrased)

Wisdom throughout scripture is practical mastery of life and conduct (Proverbs 1:5). It is truth lived. It is knowledge put into practice.

Wisdom handles the situations of life with prudence and dignity; it knows how to deal with others and how to truly live. It recognizes the sovereignty of God and seeks to understand the words of wisdom found in the word of God.¹

In fact, a loving, committed, humble, surrendered relationship with God is the starting point of true wisdom.

Solomon wrote,

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom ... (Proverbs 9:10a)

His father, David, wrote earlier,

Reverence for the Lord is the beginning of wisdom ... (Psalm 111:10)

In other words, the wisdom to know what is good begins with God.

The outer walk of wisdom begins with an inner relationship with the God of wisdom. God develops a character of wisdom in private, which is revealed by a conduct of wisdom in public.

This is the reason Paul informed us that we needed to be transformed in Romans chapter 12. We are easily squeezed into the mold of worldly wisdom, rather than that of godly wisdom. What we do is related to who we are.

The world is desperately trying to convince themselves in a way that sounds something like this – "I know I did something that was bad, but that wasn't me . . . that wasn't really me . . . I'm not a bad person; even though I did something that was sinful, I'm not a sinful person . . . that wasn't the real me."

Donald Grey Barnhouse wrote about a thief who stood before a judge with this sort of excuse. He said that he did not steal, but that an impulse came to his right hand, and his right hand stole the money. The judge quickly ended this nonsense by saying, "All right, in that case, I am sentencing your right hand to prison and the rest of the body will just have to go along."ⁱⁱ

Paul says, "Wise up!"

In other words, "Be wise," or "be skillful, studied, passionate about that which is good ("agathos," which means, "right; clean").

This is another way of saying, "practice purity". It should be practiced in private and in public. The more you practice purity in private, the more likely you will practice purity in public. The wiser your decisions are inwardly, the wiser your decisions will be outwardly.

Nurture naivety (be innocent in what is evil)

Paul adds another phrase that will help us survive Vanity Fair with godly passion and focused pursuit on the glory of God.

Notice in Romans 16:19b,

... but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil.

Paul wrote the same idea to the Philippians, *that you may prove yourselves to be . . . innocent . . . children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life ... (Philippians 2:15-16a)*

What a picture this is of the believer passing through dark and sinful Vanity Fair, holding out the word of life as a light in the darkness.

How do we live like this? We practice purity and secondly, we nurture naivety.

Paul used a word that is translated “innocent” that speaks of something unmixed – clean; wholesome; unaffected. As I studied this passage, the English word “naivety” came to mind, with the meaning, “wholesome in regard to evil”.

Naïve means, “marked by unaffected simplicity”. Webster defines it as, “deficient in worldly wisdom”.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is being literally, ignorant of stuff that the world knows a lot about.

Surviving Vanity Fair with godly character, effective distinctiveness, and the bright light of the pure gospel of Christ requires wising up to the good on one hand, and on the other hand, inviting ignorance of evil.

In other words, we refuse to study it, we refuse to become acclimated to it, we refuse to watch it, we refuse to buy it, we refuse to read it, we refuse to play it or learn it or copy it or follow it or even sing it. We choose not to learn the lyrics of the latest hit or follow the fashion decisions of the latest star.

This is self-inviting, self-regulating ignorance. We choose not to know.

Perhaps you are thinking that this is not really fair of Paul to suggest that a Christian should be naïve regarding sin. You may think these first century Christians lived in Rome, so it was probably easier for them, but times are different now – we are living in twenty-first century America.

When Paul wrote to these believers, they were living in what Seneca, the first century historian, called “the cesspool of iniquity.”

The immorality among the upper classes was nothing short of our generation. Homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality and bestiality were all acceptable moral behavior. In fact, by the time of Paul, a heterosexual couple who were not versed or experienced in some other form of sexual behavior would have been considered prudish and boring. Many of the Roman philosophers made fun of monogamous couples.

Add to this the fact that child prostitution proliferated as children, most often girls, were abandoned by parents who did not want them.

Drug addiction was epidemic – life was cheap. In fact, by the time of Paul, the poorer classes of people had formed labor unions, not for better pay or for better working conditions, but for the simple right to have a proper burial.

Animals were more protected and venerated in Paul’s day than humans. It is the same in our own day, when to destroy the egg of an eagle is against

the law, but to destroy a baby in a mother’s womb is protected by the law.

It is no more difficult for us to follow this text of scripture than for the early Roman Christians to pursue purity and nurture naivety.

We do, however, have something particularly dangerous added to our battle with evil that Rome never imagined. It is a wonderful tool in spreading the gospel and all kinds of information, but an assistant to evil like the world has never seen. We call it the “World Wide Web”. In many respects it is aptly named – a web.

I recently read an article written by the Barna Research Group that was headlined, “Christians Believe Almost Anything They Read on the Internet.” Their study, released last November, showed a heightened gullibility among evangelical Web surfers. As embarrassing as it may be, a staggering 9 out of 10 evangelical Christians who responded to this study admitted to never checking into the source of information they read online.

The Department of Internet Fraud reported that millions of dollars were stolen from overseas as a result of a single email scam. Perhaps you received the same email that I did – several of them, in fact. The email said that a rich person in Africa is urgently in need of foreign bank account numbers so he can hide his riches from corrupt leaders. The victim is promised 10% of this person’s wealth for helping to house his money in their bank accounts.

We would expect no one to believe it. However, in one year alone, this one email scammed 127.8 million dollars from gullible people.

One Chicago-based think tank said that it seems as if Christians have a case of alertness to the world, but not to the World Wide Web.

One website reported printing a satirical article about manna appearing in Sinai again, which produced a 2,000% increase in traffic to their site as people began propagating this sign as one of the key “end times phenomena”!

Frankly, this does not bother me so much. If people are foolish enough to pay to see the half boy–half lizard, they will probably pay to get some manna from Mt. Sinai mailed to them, along with holy water from the Jordan River.

What bothers me more, is the destruction that is occurring today in the lives of millions of believers, caught up in the web of Internet pornography, improper chat rooms, voyeurism, immodest if not immoral Myspace’s that invite a person through entry level voyeurism and soft-core pornography into the deeper, darker addictions.

The Justice Department, last year, estimated that 9 out of 10 young people between the ages of eight and sixteen have been exposed to pornography online.^{iv}

By the way, in an effort to keep up with Cable and Internet pornography, the standards of prime-time television are rapidly following suit.

Now, 70% of prime-time television shows feature sexual content. The number of sexual scenes per hour have nearly doubled in the last ten years to more than six scenes every hour.^v

Let us just tell the truth – we are living in a sexually saturated society.

There is a connection to seeing and doing. Observation leads to escalation, which leads to desensitization, which leads to action. These are known facts.

What we see and do follows the law of diminishing returns – we need to see and do more the next time in order to feel what we felt the first time. Sin is never satisfied with its past experience.

Imagine the implications in our generation of something Jesus Christ said in His generation,

The eye is the lamp of your body; when your eye is clear, your whole body also is full of light; but when it is bad, your body also is full of darkness. (Luke 11:34)

This is the reason David attempted to nip it in the bud at the very entry point into his life when he made the wonderful and holy commitment,

I will set no wicked thing before my eyes . . . (Psalm 101:3)

If there was ever a time to purposefully nurture naivety; to choose ignorance of sin by refusing the world's entertainment, it is now. What are you choosing to watch? What are you reading? What are you allowing through your eye gate, into your heart?

Hear the warning of Paul, in this generation, regarding the evil potential of our world.

Today, one out of every six women, including Christians, struggles with an addiction to pornography, according to a *Today's Christian Woman* survey. This is approximately thirty million women. This same survey found that 80% of the women involved are actually more likely than men to act out their behavior in real life, through affairs and multiple partners.^{vi}

Family Safe Media reported in December of last year that they have found the largest group of viewers of Internet pornography are young people between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Most of them are boys who are now set for a lifetime battle against these early impressions.

Nearly half the men polled, including pastors, Christian leaders, and regular church members, admitted to visiting an adult site during the last month. I cannot tell you how many men are caught up in this – men who we, at this church, have talked with or prayed with or know about who have become entangled in the Web.

Today there are more than 1.3 million adult oriented websites dedicated to luring people to their harm and great ruin. According to comScore Media Metrix, seventy-one million Americans of all ages will visit adult sites this month. They will look at an estimated fifteen billion pages of pornographic content this month.^{vii}

There is a connection to this epidemic and the fact that thirty-two million Americans committed adultery or fornication this week – thirty-two million this week.

At this time, ladies and gentleman, the victims of this national epidemic are children. The commercial business of child pornography is now estimated at twenty billion dollars per year worldwide. This is more than the annual revenues of ABC, NBC, and CBS combined.

You cannot watch pornography on the Internet or sexually immoral scenes on the television or at the theater, without choosing to pitch a tent inside Vanity Fair. Before long, the path of godliness that marks those on their way to the Celestial City will seem dull and boring, rigid and harsh. In other words, “Why bother? Let’s settle down, like Lot did, and pitch our tents toward Sodom and Gomorrah.”

What we need today, is a resurgence of passionate purity. The church is in desperate need of men and women, teenagers and college students who will not watch this stuff in moderation, but will practice total abstinence.

Oh that we would beg of God, a greater love for that which is good and a greater hatred for that which is evil.

Application

Four words came to mind as I studied this text. Let me give them to you.

1. Pray.

Pray for wisdom. God will never rebuke for asking for wisdom – wisdom that distinguishes between good and evil; wisdom that longs for that which is heavenly and despises that which is worldly.

2. Prepare.

The tests are coming and are already in front of us! This is war – nothing more or less.

There are two misconceptions to avoid in this battle.

- The first misconception is that walking with God will diminish the temptation to sin.

If this were true, then our Lord would have never been tempted. He was led by the Spirit of God and was walking in perfect harmony with His Father when He was tempted in the wilderness by Satan.

- The second misconception is that the longer we walk with God, the less likely we are to be tempted with sin.

If this were true, then why tempt Jesus Christ who lived a sinless life for thirty years in perfect fellowship with the Father? After thirty years of growth and development, in total surrender to the will of His Father, He was then tempted.

By the way, when Luke recorded the temptation of Christ, he ended the paragraph by reporting, . . . *the devil . . . left Him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:13)*

We would expect the text to read, “. . . the devil left Christ forever.” There was no need to bother tempting Jesus.

However, it says that the devil left Him until another opportunity might arise. Understand that Jesus Christ is walking with purity and godly perfection, and Satan is trailing Him, waiting for any possible opportunity to tempt Him.

If Satan thought he could trip up the Son of God, how confident do you think he is that he can trip us up?

3. Pursue.

Run after the right things; run away from the wrong things.

4. Praise.

Paul writes in Romans 16:20a,

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. . . .

Satan was crushed at the cross, he is being crushed by every victory over temptation, and he will be crushed in the final judgment when he is condemned forever in hell.

It is as if Paul says, “Praise God for Satan’s defeat in the past, the present, and especially, praise God for His ultimate and final supremacy over Satan.”

In the meantime, as we do battle; as we pursue purity and nurture naivety, we can also praise God for His daily strength for the saints. Paul wrote at the end of Romans 16:20,

. . . *The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.*

Perhaps knowing that the Roman believers failed, like American believers and believers on every continent fail, Paul ended this by reminding us of the grace of God. Wonderful, unstoppable, immeasurable, faithful, grace.

Praise God for His amazing grace. Do not trample on it – live a life that demonstrates gratitude because of it.

Let us commit to Him our need for forgiveness and pardon, and for His power and grace for the temptations we will need to run from even today. As we run, let us praise God that one day, finally and ultimately, Satan will be crushed under our feet in final and eternal victory.

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts;
Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/22/2006 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Friedrich and Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged by Geoffrey Bromiley (Eerdmans, 1985), p. 1058.

ⁱⁱ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans: Volume 4* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 155.

ⁱⁱⁱ Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.m-w.com>.

^{iv} Daniel Weiss, Obscenity Enforcement, Corporate Participation and Violence Against Women and Children, <http://www.family.org>, July 23, 2005.

^v *Leadership Journal* (Winter, 2006), p. 35.

^{vi} *Today’s Christian Woman* (September/October 2003).

^{vii} <http://www.protectkids.com>.