

Temptations In The City

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[0 : 00] Well, did you hear that? We're talking about appearances today. I'd like just to start. There's a brilliant illustration of the whole matter, I think, in C.S. Lewis, who talks about a fellow with a top hat like that.

A wonderful voice, a wonderful figure. And there he is. And he actually is only a balloon, but he looks well.

His owner is a little man like that who stands here. And this little man likes to have this appearance. And so what he does is he's actually the animator of this great charade here.

And the charade is who he pretends to be. In the story, which is in *The Great Divorce*, you may remember that this gentleman is being persuaded as to why he should, in his own right, come to commit his life to Christ.

And, of course, he never answers for himself. He always answers through this charade. And the more this charade grows and gets bigger, the smaller he gets.

[1 : 22] And the question is whether this is going to deflate like a balloon and become nothing, and this person become who he really is, or whether the charade is going to be all that is there.

Now, what the scriptures say really about this business of appearances is that life, for most of us, maybe for all of us, consists in a successful deception.

You know, that that's what we do with our lives. And much of the world is built on successful deception.

You will remember that Vincent van Gogh painted some sunflowers, which sold not long ago for \$39.9 million.

And then somebody came along and saw his irises and paid \$53.9 million for them. Now, they can't be any more than they are, and there is no conceivable way that they could be worth \$39.9 million.

[2 : 44] It just couldn't happen. But since we live in a world of brilliant deceptions, that's one of them. And that's a very successful one. And all the world will believe that that painting is worth \$39 million.

And if you want it, until the landlady comes along and sees it and says, what are we doing with this thing, and throws it out. But until then, as long as the deception can be maintained, and it's just, you know, another illustration of that fine old fairy story of the emperor's new clothes, you know, where the emperor was conned by a couple of smart tailors who sold him a suit of underwear, and was told that if he couldn't see the beautiful threads, and the beautiful material, and the beautiful cut, and the beautiful tailoring, and all that, it only meant that he was stupid.

So rather than admit he was stupid, he walked down the street in his underwear. And that is just a classic picture of what appearances do and how important they are in our world.

Eugene Peterson, who's a Presbyterian minister down in the state, has said that one of the basic things that happened in the time when Greek and Hebrew cultures came into conflict, and this was the time of Herod the Great, and Greek and Hebrew culture were in conflict, he said Greek culture was based on two great realities.

One was the nude figure, and the other was the theater, and that was the basis of Greek culture. Hebrew culture was based on the law of Moses and the incarnation of the word of God in Christ.

[4 : 50] And he said that the competition is very keen, and that Herod the Great built seven major theaters across the whole of the land of Palestine, which Peterson says are never mentioned in the New Testament.

But it was an attempt to move the world from being a world which lived by hearing and obeying to a world that lived by seeing and believing.

And that seeing and believing was a much more superficial orientation to the world than hearing and obeying. Seeing and believing makes it possible for us to create a world of appearances. And so we become totally preoccupied with the business of appearances. The eye is the most easily deceived of our senses.

Ask any magician and he'll show you how easily it's deceived. We see what we want to see, and our eyes lose almost any ability to be objective at all.

[6 : 05] We often see just what others want us to see. And so, I mean, we live in a world in which pornography is a major problem.

And what it does to us is to create a world of visual sexuality, which doesn't involve the warm and intimate contact of human being with human being.

It's something that you can do just by the exercise of your fantasy, stimulated by pornography, and you become a kind of auto-erotic.

And that, I suppose, is probably the biggest sexual problem in our society. It doesn't involve anybody else except you.

And it's totally a world of visual fantasy. And I just mention that because I think it's a very powerful reinforcement of the fact that we live in a world of appearances, and those appearances are very deceptive.

[7 : 29] When I was thinking about that, I was made aware of the fact that when St. Paul was converted on the road to Damascus, the Lord saw it necessary to blind him for a period of time because, well, I guess I'll just leave you to think about why that happened.

But it's probably because in a way in which we live, that we encounter thousands upon thousands upon thousands of visual impressions every day.

And we live with a kind of constant appetite for the next visual thing. And it's just, we have no way of processing it.

You know, that's why I think that TV and the gospel should never get mixed up with each other because TV creates an appearance behind which there is no reality.

And that's basically a definition of religion, an appearance behind which there is no reality. And so that you're caught with that problem in our society, that we are a highly visual society, a society that spends most of its energies creating appearances, a society which has lost touch with its own reality because it's so busy inflating and maintaining an appearance which it knows is not reality.

[9 : 19] And that's why I think that this question of appearances and our cultural addiction to appearances is something that we need to look at.

It's something that we recognize in our language because you know that you say things like, well, I've got to make an appearance at the office.

That is, there's nothing I have to do. There is no work that requires doing. I just have to be seen to be there so that people will think that I have something to do and that I'm in a hurry to go on to something else, but that he was here a while ago, but he had to go.

Well, we do that kind of, I have to make an appearance. We're required to make an appearance at court.

Not that we're guilty at all, but it's just that we're required to make an appearance. We have that slogan in our society, you know, in which the basic integrity of our society is presented to us in those wonderful words, a thing must not only be honest, it must appear to be honest.

[10 : 32] And if you have to choose between, choose the appearance. You know, that's how our world tries to work the thing out.

It's the same thing when you talk about detective stories. A detective story is deliberately giving you, building up in your mind, the appearance that this is what happened.

And so you get taken in chapter by chapter, and the appearance that the author wants you to have is built and reinforced over and over again until you come to the last three pages and recognize that you've been deceived all along and you came to the wrong conclusion.

Because the appearance is not the reality. And I think that that may be why many, many detective story writers are Christians.

Because they're always living in between the appearance of things and the reality of things. And that to recognize that.

[11 : 39] And when you don't recognize that, then you're in trouble. There is a story written by Walker Percy. It's not a detective story exactly. It's called *The Second Coming*.

And it talks about appearances in a way that I found significant when I was trying to figure out how to talk to you about appearances. Let me quote to you from the story *The Second Coming*. There, at any rate, stands Will Barrett, on the edge of a gorge in Old Carolina. A talented, agreeable, wealthy man, living in as pleasant an environment as one can imagine, and yet who was thinking of putting a bullet in his brain.

Fifteen minutes later, he's sitting in his Mercedes in a five-car garage, sniffing the Luger, watching a cat lying in a swatch of sunlight under the rear bumper of his wife's Rolls-Royce silver cloud three spaces away.

Absently, he held the barrel of the Luger to his nose, then to his temple, and turned his head to and fro against the cold metal of the gun sight.

[13:01] Is it too much to wonder what he is doing there, this pleasant, prosperous American, sitting in a \$35,000 car and sniffing cordite from a Luger?

How one might well ask could Will Barrett have come to such a pass? Is it not a matter for astonishment that such a man, having succeeded in life, living in a lovely home with a lovely view, surrounded by good, cheerful folk, family and friends, merry golfers, should now find himself on a beautiful Sunday morning, sunk in fragrant German leather, speculating about such things?

Well, I mean, just to relieve your mind, he doesn't shoot himself. But he does become enormously aware that the appearance of his life, the visible reality, is all there is.

And the invisible reality, on which life depends, doesn't exist for him. And that's what the book's about. That the invisible reality in his life is just not there.

And so, I want to just give you a kind of quick illustration of how I think this works in a way that may help to understand it.

[14:34] It may just confuse you, but I'll try it anyway. And this is Archbishop William Temple. And he says that this is the kind of spectrum of reality.

And it works like this. I think I've got to have another one here. And he said that reality is matter, which is this.

Matter is created from energy, and that's what we call the Big Bang. What is came from a tremendous source of energy.

Matter, with the Big Bomb, dissolves into energy again. But he says it all starts from spirit. And it all ends in spirit.

And so he says matter is only the sort of visible part of the spectrum of reality. And that reality starts with spirit, that is with God, becomes energy, becomes matter, becomes energy, becomes spirit.

[15:48] And most of us live as though this is the only reality there is. And we fail to recognize where we're from and where we're bound for. And as creation began with the Big Bang, it will probably end with the Big Bang.

But the reality of human experience is not contained only within that part of the spectrum.

You see, you have the same thing, actually, in the... There we are. The sacrament.

The bread and the wine. That is to bring into visible, tangible reality, a spiritual reality, which is the ultimate reality.

Remember how scriptures are very careful to say that we fix our eyes not on what is seen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

[17:01] That this is the temporary reality which is visible to us, but it emerges from and ultimately dissolves into a spiritual reality, which is what our life is all about.

And if your life only relates to the material reality, then you haven't really come in touch with the thing that Will Barrett was struggling to come in touch with.

Because in terms of the material reality, he had it all. But in terms of the spiritual reality, he didn't know what to do. And that's why I think, you know, within the Christian tradition, there is this sacrament, which is by catechetical definition, the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

And that's why in the Catholic tradition, the whole of the realm of the unseen is communicated in the bread and the wine.

because this is the touch, taste, see, handle reality, which represents the ultimate unseen reality of the purpose of God from beginning to end.

[18:18] And that the way you stay in touch with that reality is through the sacrament of bread and wine. Now that's how the New Testament deals with the questions of the appearance of things and

the reality, the visibility and the invisibility of it.

So that when you come to the passage of Scripture that you read today, he talks about the religious life in these terms. He said, when you're fasting, you know, anoint your face, comb your hair, and don't give the appearance of fasting.

When you're giving alms, don't have somebody sound a trumpet and say, Mr. Jones in row five has just given us \$500. Can anybody up that?

You know, that's a... And then another fanfare while someone over here steps up with a thousand. And that kind of thing, Jesus says, is to be invisible.

And he said, when you pray, don't come out of your closet, go into your closet. Close the door and pray in secret. And the reason that that happens and Christianity is a very invisible kind of religion.

[19 : 47] You can't tell by the appearance. You know that the... The Mennonites all wore black clothes, black hats, drove black buggies, pulled by black horses, so nobody would notice them.

And now people travel for thousands of miles just to see them. You know. The Anglicans, being jealous, decided to try the other and they wear beautiful golden robes and golden hats and golden this and golden that, thinking that by all this sparkle of gold, nobody will see that inside there is a little man who's a sinner.

That's... You know, that it's... We're always confronted with the problem of visibility. And Jesus says that your spiritual life is to be invisible.

That's your invisible world. And the difficulty with us is that all our time is spent on maintaining the outward appearance and there is no invisible reality reality to our lives.

We were... We had a guest in the last week who stayed with us for a week who has been blind since he was 11 years old. He's a very capable counselor.

[21 : 12] But he... We lived with him in our home for a week and it's amazing to... You know, what happened to him, what happened to us, you know, because his reality was so different than our reality because our reality was caught up with seeing all the time and he didn't have to worry about that at least a little bit.

It was a strange experience but it sort of spoke to me very clearly about the fact that his visible world is zilch but his invisible world is huge beyond all imagining.

I mean, he's a tremendous man of faith and understanding and he's a very much sought-after counselor because he can see the reality that most of his counselees can't see and he can put them in touch with it so that you get that kind of thing in Christian faith that you come in touch with your invisible world, the invisible reality of your relationship to God, the invisible reality of God relating to you.

Now, what happens is that in Hebrews chapter 11 it talks about this. You know, it talks about that faith is the evidence of things not seen, that the Christian lives by faith in an invisible world and that God is the God who created all things visible and invisible and that what's important for us is to get in touch with the invisible in a world where the visible, the appearances of things, screams for our commitment and our attention.

And so, you come to a verse like that in Hebrews chapter 11 where it talks about Moses and says, by faith Moses when he had grown up refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.

[23 : 21] That was the social standing that was offered to him. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.

You know, the things that are seen are temporary. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt.

Because he was looking ahead to his reward, by faith he left Egypt not fearing the king's anger. He persevered because he saw him who is invisible.

and so you see a man for whom the whole visible world was in a sense there for the taking and he chose the reality of the invisible world.

And you see, this is where you get back to the thing of a kind of seeing is believing kind of world to which most people in our society are committed.

[24 : 29] a seeing is believing kind of world to a hearing obeying kind of world. And the hearing is the invisible God who became visible historically only in the person of Jesus Christ and who speaks to us through our ears and our hearts in order that we might without seeing him believe in him and in believing in him we will obey him.

And that that's the relationship to Jesus Christ that Paul talks about in Romans. He says that this word is there and this word is spoken to you and you you can say well how do I how do I come to terms with that word and Paul says well it's on your lips and in your heart the invisible world is right there and if you will believe in your heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord you will be saved.

You the reality of your world will shift from the visible to the invisible reality from the temporal to the eternal. And so as we live in a world of appearances it's desperately important that we are in touch with the invisible reality of the God who has spoken to us in Christ.

Let me say a prayer. Father we acknowledge that we live very much in a world of appearances and that most of our energies go to establishing and maintaining appearances.

Will you grant to us the grace to know the reality the eternal reality of the things which are invisible the things which are ours by faith and that in a world of things in a world of appearances there is an underlying reality which we confront in Jesus Christ.

[27 : 11] we ask this in his name. Amen.