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THE MORAL SURTAX

(Scripture from Luke 12:48)

Probably one of the most hated words in the English language is the word "tax." The mere mention of taxes is enough to make some people angry. They despise taxes in all forms. Yet one of the biggest issues before our national life at the present moment has to do with a Presidential proposal for a surtax to pay for the costly war in Vietnam, to prevent inflation and to thrust a large federal finger in the hole at Ft. Knox through which our precious gold supply is leaking and flowing out across the world. A surtax, as you know, is an additional or extra tax placed on something that is already taxed. For obvious reasons a surtax is particularly loathsome and unpopular. Yet some experts are saying that it may save our economic life.

Now this may not be the most appealing way in which to introduce what I want to say this morning to the Millikin graduating class, but I have been pondering a most provocative suggestion made by a biblical scholar, Henry J. Cadbury. Though his suggestion is related primarily to the Christian community, I think it may be applied quite aptly to those who are graduating from college in 1968.

Cadbury in his book Jesus: What Manner of Man calls attention to a saying of Jesus which, though set down in a certain context, probably had circulated in the early church independently. Jesus said: "Every one to whom much is given, of him shall much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more." In commenting on this sentence, Cadbury reminds us that the law most often levies a flat-rate tax or requirement on everyone. Hence everyone, rich and poor alike, pays the same amount for a poll tax. The same is true with a sales tax: the millionaire pays exactly the same 4% on the dollar, that the poor man pays.

The speed limits set for highway travel require that everyone observe them and no allowances are made for persons of superior driving ability.

A legalistic kind of religion tends to do the same: all people, regardless of their varying privileges and abilities, are expected to observe flat-rate requirements of the law. But Cadbury declares that this is not true for the Christian. In the sentence just quoted, he observes that Jesus goes beyond the mere principle of graded or proportionate responsibility. Says Cadbury, "Were we to press the wording of the second line of ^{the} couplet, 'To whom much is committed of him will more be required,' we might find something even more exacting than proportionate responsibility for the highly privileged. We might assume a kind of surtax in the moral realm." (pp.23-31)

If this is true, and I think it is, the Christian is not called upon just to contribute his "fair share" to the services of the world. He is really called upon to work overtime morally, to give of himself far in excess of what is merely required of him. He does not really measure out his moral responses in terms of averages. A Christian is called upon to pay a moral surtax. This means that his moral performance in this world ought to be far superior to that which might be expected of others who have not received his advantages.

Now I am aware this morning that I am not speaking to a graduating class made up entirely of professing, committed Christians. Indeed I am aware that many of you have tacitly or openly rejected the Christian faith and some have done so perhaps for the very good reason that the moral performance of many Christians you have seen has been mean and meager. Moreover, I realize that there are in this class those whose religious rootage is non-Christian. For them I have only the highest respect and appreciation and I have no designs for their conversion.

But I do think that the concept of a moral surtax speaks as compellingly to the man or woman who is about to receive his college degree in the year 1968 as it

does to the Christian. There are something like 7 million students enrolled in American college and university life at the present time. In terms of the desperate needs of the world and the ominous threat to the continuation of life on this planet, I would assert that your graduation from college confers upon you the status of superior advantage and privilege. In comparison with the plight of at least a billion people on this earth, your college degree places you among the favored few of human history. I would also assert that it levies upon you a kind of moral surtax.

Recently, at the General Conference of the new United Methodist Church, we debated for quite a while the right of every child, if qualified, to higher education. Manifestly that right is not yet established, but it has been secured for you. Hence, "Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more."

Some time ago I saw a cartoon in the New Yorker (April 1, 1967, p.37) which pictured a wife bringing the morning mail in to her middle-aged husband at the breakfast table. She says to him: "Oh, dear! It's from your Alma Mater. The classes from '32 through '36 are being recalled, owing to faculty incompetence during that period." Well, I doubt that Millikin's Class of 1968 will be recalled at any future date because of the incompetence of the faculty at this time. But even though it may sound insufferably dogmatic to you I would assert that you ought to be recalled, and quickly, if your higher education does not reveal itself in moral competence.

Another cartoon appeared recently in the Saturday Review (Dec. 30, 1967) showing a little boy bringing a globe of the world into the living room where his father and mother are seated. He says to them: "It's going to blow up and I don't want it in my room." Yet that world is in your room and no one possessing a truly higher education could be so obtuse as to think he can deny it. If you

accept your badge of higher education, you will automatically confront the issue of a moral surtax. I invite you to consider this tax with me as I make the three following assertions:

-I-

First, I want to assert that if higher education means anything it means that moral imagination is enlarged. It does not matter whether a person is a Christian college graduate or a non-Christian college graduate. He has the moral obligation to use his brains and his soul to see that the opportunities of many people in this world are not equal to his own. He will ^{not} waste his precious time on this earth searching the mysteries of God's creation for a completely rational and satisfying explanation of why the goods and privileges of this earth should have been so unequally and, in our view, unjustly, distributed. In a real sense his calling is not to reason why or to curse God for what he cannot understand; it is his calling to respond affirmatively and morally to the demand of the ancient prophet Amos: ". . . Let justice roll down like the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (5:24) And to fulfill that demand he will have to pay a moral surtax.

Admittedly, moral imagination is not easily acquired. A college degree now is something of a bank draft which one may use to draw heavily upon this world's rich store of goods and privileges and pleasures. How inclined we are to look down upon people who have not made it as well as we. How smug and self-righteous we are in condemning those who cry out for our help.

But we forget that we may have had advantages which would suggest that just because we have been given much, of us much more will be expected. The poet Shelley once said: "A man to be greatly good must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and in many others; the pains and pleasure of his species he must share" (Quoted by Pratt in Reason in the Art of Living, page 296).

I think every Christian minister who is worth his salt is trying desperately these days to get his altogether too comfortable people to ask themselves questions about their own blessings and advantages, even though they have been steeped in the Protestant ethic which led them to assume that their hard work and respectability got them their wealth, and that the only reason other people don't have what they have is due to their sloth and failure. But I would ask all of you to think imaginatively with me for a moment:

-How does it happen, do you suppose, that you were born in an America that is flowing with milk and honey, and not on that kind of parched and sick soil that characterizes much of India?

-How does it happen that you were born in a palace of luxury compared with someone who was born in a pathetic tin shack in Haiti?

-How does it happen that you, when you establish your own homes, will be able to tuck your children into warm and safe beds at night whereas thousands of innocent little children in Vietnam have been sprayed with the hellish flames of napalm, their skin burned from head to foot, and their grass huts destroyed?

-Why is it that you, if you were born white, have been born into a world of comparative freedom whereas another man was cursed from the day of his birth because his skin was black?

-Why is it that you have possibly enjoyed robust health all of your life whereas others have known nothing but disease and disability from the moment they were born?

-How does it happen that you have been privileged to continue your education and to come to this day of graduation from college whereas over 25,000 American young men have lost their lives in a vicious war in Vietnam?

Now as you struggle with the painful exercise of this kind of imagination, can't you see that it is, frankly, just plain stupid and ignorant not to recognize

that you have been given great and wonderful advantages of which millions upon millions of God's children have never dreamed? John Erskine once said that the reader "has the moral obligation to be intelligent." Wouldn't it be appropriate for us to revise that and make ourselves understand that the educated person has the intellectual obligation to be moral? Was Jesus not right: "Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more."

-II-

The second assertion I would make is that there is an inner logic about higher education, as there is with the Christian life, that confers the status of servanthood upon the holder of a sheepskin. Christians at their best have always understood their calling in this way. I think it is not unfitting for every highly educated person to think of his commencement in the same way. Such servanthood involves inevitably the payment of the moral surtax.

The moral servant of the 20th century does not look upon the world as did the dour Lucy in Peanuts who recently made the rounds of her little friends asking them to sign a document. Her remarks went like this: "Sign this. . . It absolves me from all blame. . . Thank you. . . Sign this, please. . . It absolves me from all blame. . . Sign this, will you? It absolves me from all blame. . . Thank you". . . Eventually she gets to Charlie Brown. "Sign this, please. It absolves me from all blame. Charlie Brown is so dumb he says, "I don't understand." Lucy cuts him short: "Just sign it . . . That's right . . . Thank you." Then as she walks away with Charlie's signature she explains, "No matter what happens any place or any time in the world, this absolves me from all blame!" Charlie Brown comments dryly: "That must be a nice document to have. . ." (Sept. 24, 1967). But the truth is that none of us here possesses such a document: it is unprintable and unobtainable. As servants who have been prepared and

equipped to pay the moral surtax we know that we do have responsibility for what is happening in the world.

It is at this point, I would say, that the hippie movement is a complete bust: though the "love generation" is rightly protesting the barbaric materialism and cruelty of our time, they have really freaked out because they have withdrawn, for the most part, from any sense of participation in healing the world's suffering. Though most of them have come from sterile upper middle-class backgrounds, they have not seen in their superior advantages any reason to pay the moral surtax. I think they have in fact cheated on their responsibilities. It is unthinkable that the truly educated college graduate, after getting tuned in and turned on, would ever drop out!

Certainly the student who has enjoyed the benefits of a college education acquired in comparative peace and protection will be compelled to think of his accumulations and advantages in terms of the moral surtax and servanthood.

William Stringfellow, a lawyer and brilliant lay theologian, is one who in his own life has dramatized this "overtime" contribution. Seeking to express his concern for those who live in the slums, Stringfellow moved into a tenement in Harlem and offered his legal services to those in dire need. He has written of his first experiences:

"The smells inside the tenement . . . were a suffocating mixture of rotting food, rancid mattresses, dead rodents, dirt, and the stale odors of human life.

"This was to be home. It has been home before: for a family of eight - five kids, three adults. Some of their belongings had been left behind. Some of their life had, too.

"The place, altogether, was about 25x12 feet, with a wall separating the kitchen section from the rest. In the kitchen was a bathtub; a tiny, rusty sink; a refrigerator that didn't work; and an ancient gas range. In one corner was a toilet with a bowl without a seat. Water dripped perpetually from the box above the bowl.

"The other room was filled with beds: two double-decker military cots, and a big ugly convertible sofa. There wasn't room for anything else. The walls and ceilings were mostly holes and patches and peeling paint, sheltering legions of cockroaches.

"This was to be my home. I wondered for a moment, why. Then I remembered that this is the sort of place in which most people live, in most of the world, for most of the time. This or something worse. Then I was home."

(from "Selected Readings" in MAN'S SEARCH FOR A MEANINGFUL FAITH)

William Stringfellow is not only a first-rate lawyer, an outstanding theologian, but a devoted Christian who understands what is meant by the moral surtax and responsible servanthood.

Recently I was impressed to learn of another promise of this exceptional moral performance, this one by a sensational professional football player. I speak now of Mike Garrett, former Heisman Trophy winner from the University of Southern California. He stands only 5' 8 3/4 inches tall. Two years ago he signed a professional contract to play football - a contract in six figures. He grew up in a Los Angeles ghetto, one of six children. His father died when he was very small. His mother fought a losing battle with poverty. But recently Garrett disclosed that when his original contract of five years expires he wants to give up football. "I love sports," he said. "They've been part of all my life, and I love football. But there are more important things. I'd like to go work among the poor." (Look Magazine, Nov. 14, 1967, page 118)

Everyone knows two things about the University of California at Berkeley - it is one of the world's greatest institutions of higher education, and it was the first scene of current student unrest and turmoil. Yet it is also true that more graduates of Berkeley have gone into the Peace Corps than from any other educational center. And I was interested last summer while in Berkeley to meet a professor in the School of Law who told me that a large number of his students were manifesting a deep interest in justice for the underprivileged, and that

many of them were already working in such projects.

Also last summer I had many long discussions with my niece who is a student at the University of California at Santa Barbara. This summer she is going to Uganda as a participant in the Experiment of International Living. In her spare hours at Santa Barbara she has been spending a good deal of time doing house and garden work for two handicapped and shut-in ladies. On one weekend she went to a florist and persuaded him to give her several flats of flowers free, and a young male helper went along to put them in with Laurie. My sister, also a graduate of Millikin, copied this priceless note which my niece received from one of the ladies, and sent it to me:

"Dear Laurie:

What is so rare as a day in June? That's easy -- a coed who will make the kind of unselfed contribution to another that you made Saturday at my home on Valerio.

At sunset (strong daylight pains my eyes) I took my crutches and walked out to the front sidewalk. This gave me a panoramic view of your loving handiwork! Every little johnny-jump-up, all the marigolds stood tall and proud singing a night-song of glory and goodwill. Tears of gratitude and joy (because there are young people like YOU!) washed my tired eyes of all the hurt.

Laurie, you and I share a secret. We both know that it is not super freeways and modern new public buildings that will remake the world. It is the love you gave to me and Elaine on Saturday - impersonal, unselfed, universal LOVE alone will rebuild our world - and make it fit "for human habitation.

Lovingly, Nancy and Elaine Roberts"

In a footnote my sister explained to me that Nancy Roberts is frightfully crippled with leprosy, and her daughter, Elaine, is a mongoloid.

I submit to you that these are examples of loving servanthood which make the world fit for human habitation. I submit also that they are being done by persons who are willingly paying the moral surtax, persons who understand that "Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required: and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more."

-III-

The final assertion I want to make about this moral surtax must be made in all honesty: it is a tax that must be paid voluntarily. No one can really legislate it. Basic, run-of-the-mill morality can be legislated. But not this morality, for it is the morality of excellence!! The government of the United States may very well legislate that its citizens will have to shell out a surtax to pay for the war in Vietnam and stop the flow of gold. But the moral surtax you must pay voluntarily. By virtue of your educational, material and spiritual advantages it may be expected of you; but you will have to decide to pay it.

I think it is realistic, not cynical, to assume that many of you graduating today will feel no urgent call to servanthood. Some graduates will take a good look at the sorry mess the world is in and frankly cop out. Having been tuned in, maybe even turned on, they will promptly drop out.

One cannot really suppress the speculation concerning the contemporary crop of campus hippies, radicals, protesters, say, ten years hence. Some may very well recede comfortably and easily back into the sanctuary of upper middle-class morality and affluence, hair smartly cut, beards cleanly shaven, bodies freshly bathed. Some may plant themselves neatly in the soil of suburban vegetable life, their walls lined with college trophies and degrees, signifying nothing. And no one can make them do otherwise. Possibly their college experience can be summed up in a sign that was observed on a weekend visit to the Princeton campus, and reported in the New Yorker (Nov. 26, 1966, page 50):

Peace Parade
11:30 Saturday
Nassau Hall
Bring dates
Picnic lunch
Through by Kickoff

But for others, I am sure that the day of Commencement is truly a "kickoff" for lives that will seek to make a difference in the world. This will be a day of decision and commitment where the graduating senior permits his higher education to make him a servant in a world of crushing, infinite need. This decision, this commitment, may very well have the force and effect of a genuine religious experience. The great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, once said: "He who decides with all of his soul decides for God; for all wholeness is God's image . ." (quoted in a review of his book ON JUDAISM).

You may not want to give your commitment that kind of a theological label or description. Yet if you do decide with all of your soul to use your education and life in making yourself morally responsible for the alleviation of the vast suffering and needs of the world, I should be prepared to say, from my point-of-view, that you have decided for God. And may I simply add, out of my own faith, that if you do on this day decide with all of your soul to pay this moral surtax, the God I believe to be in Christ, certainly the God of all creation, of all justice and love and mercy, will support you, and go with you, and never leave you to walk alone. Who could deny that these words have become the moving hymn of your generation?

"How many times must a man look up,
 Before he can see the sky?
 Yes, and how many ears must one man have,
 Before he can hear people cry?
 Yes, and how many deaths will it take 'till he
 Knows that too many people have died?
 The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind,
 The answer is blowin' in the wind."

I would dare say that the answer to these questions is in the quality and depth of your education and moral commitment, and that the wind on which it blows is the wind of God.