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"PRICELESS INTANGIBLES"

A Radio Address by DR. EDWARD HUGHES PRUDEN
(Delivered in the absence of DR. RALPH W. SOCKMAN)

Many have been seriously asking in recent years whether we in America can, in a genuinely Christian spirit, be thankful for what we have when so many millions in other lands are facing awful privation and stark tragedy. I think we can, if, as someone has said, we "recognize our responsibilities and the source from which our blessings flow."

In days of national crisis and grave danger we need all the confidence and hope we can acquire, and these things are greatly strengthened and supported by the spirit of gratitude. He who keeps the springs of gratitude flowing in his heart is invariably an optimist. I feel sure that is one thing the Psalmist had in mind when he wrote, "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord." Not only is it a good thing because of its recognition of God, but also because of what it does for the individual himself. It is impossible for a man to count his blessings without coming to the conclusion that the world after all, is a much better place than it sometimes appears to be. The remembrance of God's mercies will provide us with a far more hopeful point of view.

It isn't easy for a Christian anywhere today to remain in a state of constant gratitude, and in some countries it is particularly hard because of the suffering and sacrifice which many experience when they insist upon putting God above the State. It may seem to some of those who are being so severely afflicted that these are hardly the days for thanksgiving. In all probability they are more inclined toward sorrow and regret. But these afflicted ones should be reminded that such days provide the most appropriate occasion for gratitude, "for we know that all things work together for good to them that love God," and for this assurance we can all give thanks.

Even in these dark days there are still many material blessings for which we should be thankful, but these are not the things concerning which I am thinking particularly this morning. In recent years we have been reminded again of the transitory nature of things, and we recall those words that conclude the fourth chapter of Second Corinthians, "for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal." Lest we be tempted to feel sorry for ourselves and to take too seriously the loss of some things which may have appeared at the time to be essential to life at its best, let us turn to God this morning in special gratitude for some of those things which may properly be numbered among our priceless intangibles.

For one thing, I am thankful that among men today there is a growing sense of corporate guilt for the state of the world in which we live. In past days men were inclined to condemn other individuals and nations for the trage-

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dies that overtook the human race. In a time of war it is particularly easy to point the finger of condemnation at some one country and accuse it of being solely responsible for all the tragic things that have happened. Such an attitude seems to relieve one of any sense of guilt, and he thereby takes refuge in an insecure castle that is built of his own erroneous thinking. There were a great many people who indulged themselves in that kind of reasoning, or lack of reasoning, during the last war. Today, however, we see a different spirit revealing itself, and to that extent, at least, the situation is more encouraging from a spiritual point of view. Many of us are beginning to realize that our own hands are not altogether clean and that we must, if we are honest, assume our rightful share of the guilt for our troubled world. We cannot for a moment condone, indorse, or approve that which the aggressor nations are doing, nor are we at all disposed to offer an excuse for the behavior of the leaders of those nations; but we are quite prepared to face very frankly our own failures and mistakes, and realize that some of them may have been contributing factors in bringing about this present world tragedy.

Nearly two years ago a group of British churchmen drew up a statement in which they acknowledged their own personal responsibility, and the responsibility of their own country, for some of the influences that went into the creation of the catastrophe that has now overtaken us all. This is something new under the sun. No longer is one side in an armed conflict pictured as a monster, and the other side as the guileless lamb. To some extent, at least, we have been granted the gift to see ourselves as others see us, and this in itself constitutes a hopeful sign for the years that are ahead.

We have seen the folly of thanking God that we are not like other men, and now we are ready to say with the Publican, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." At one time prosperous men were accustomed to look upon poor men with a certain amount of disdain, believing that such poverty was due to shiftlessness and a lack of ambition. But today there is an increasing number of prosperous men who see their own failure reflected in the failure of any one of their fellowmen. They realize that perhaps they have not done all they might have done to help make the good things of life more accessible to all those who are willing to work for them. They are beginning to see that no man's property is secure as long as his neighbor's property is insecure, and that one's own interests are best safeguarded when he gives adequate regard to the interests of others. Prosperity is not always a sign of undisputed merit, nor is poverty necessarily a sign of neglect. There was a time when men of good character looked upon those behind prison bars with a degree of moral superiority and were inclined to scorn them for their weakness and folly. But today, many men of good character see in other men's errors an indication of their own faults and failures. We are all bound together in the bundle of life and we are beginning to see that when individuals or nations follow some reprehensible way of life, it reflects a failure on our part to discharge to the best of our ability those spiritual and social obligations which God has entrusted to us. For this growing sense of corporate guilt I am profoundly thankful.

Among our priceless intangibles I would also mention the growing sense of unity among Christians. In the olden days opposing camps of Christians entered into long and heated debates between themselves. Later, there

followed a time of strained toleration. Then there came a period of growing friendliness; and still later, a measure of cooperation. Today I believe we are entering an era of appreciation during which we shall discover, admire, and even appropriate the good things to be found in all the churches. No longer are we rivals and competitors but workers together in the great and glorious task of establishing our Lord's kingdom in the hearts of men.

This does not mean, of course, that we are compromising our convictions or sacrificing principle for the sake of good fellowship; it means rather that we are beginning to comprehend the essential oneness that binds us together as we seek to carry out, each in his own way, our Master's commission to his disciples. It is true that we do not agree on all points, but it is equally true that we do not disagree on all points; and the things upon which we agree are far more important and significant than the things concerning which we are not in hearty accord. It would be impossible to find a local congregation in which there would be absolute doctrinal agreement. There may be a generally accepted creedal statement, but even that is subject to individual interpretation. These individual differences, however, do not hamper spiritual cooperation but actually strengthen it, since they provide a variety of approach and insight which enriches any undertaking.

In the Upper Room on the occasion of the institution of the Lord's Supper, there might have been found among the disciples almost every shade of theological opinion. It would have been practically impossible to have drawn up a creed that would have been wholly acceptable to them all. But there was a distinct unity which bound them together--a unity based not upon a common theology, but upon a common loyalty and devotion to Christ. I doubt very much if we shall ever achieve Christian unity upon the basis of a universally accepted creed, but without doubt a genuine unity can be achieved upon the basis of common loyalty and devotion to the great Saviour of us all.

I enjoy the fellowship I have with members of my own communion as much as any member of it, but if this were all the fellowship and cooperation I were permitted to have, I should be conscious of a distinct spiritual loneliness. In every communion there is an increasing number of those who hold that Christians are one people, regardless of the names by which they are called, and that this sense of oneness transcends all the barriers that man has erected in the past. For this I thank God and take courage.

Upon our list of priceless intangibles I should also place the extent to which our Christian missionary enterprise has been spiritually strengthened during these years of warfare, in spite of the staggering material losses it has sustained. Soon after China was invaded in the summer of 1937, people began suggesting very seriously that it might be wise to discontinue, at least for a while, our Oriental missions. Now, after five years, it has been revealed that during these tragic years of suffering and death, the missionaries, by their loyalty and sacrificial spirit, have done more to win Oriental peoples to Christ than during any period of similar length in all the history of Christian missions. Even thoughtful people have asked if

the missionaries did not create embarrassing diplomatic problems by refusing to leave their posts of duty when they have been advised by diplomatic authorities to do so. To such a question there is only one reply that far greater spiritual problems would have been created if the heralds of the Cross had fled at the approach of danger. Since the missionaries have been willing to remain with their native colleagues and suffer the privations and perils these natives have been called upon to suffer, their gospel is being given more serious consideration, and the Saviour they represent becomes increasingly appealing. The days of missionary heroism are not a part of our ancient past only; they constitute a part of our contemporary Christian history.

We certainly did not welcome the terrible era of war which is now upon us, and surely we did our utmost to prevent its approach; but as it has progressed from nation to nation, the stories of martyrdom usually associated with the early Christian era have been reenacted in our day, and again "the blood of the martyrs" has become "the seed of the churches". God's cause is not being defeated and destroyed; rather is it being tried in the furnace of opposition and persecution; and the world is being given a chance to see just how deeply rooted and unconquerable our faith really is.

Courageous missionaries who have returned home recently under compulsion rather than by their own volition, are already talking about the future and making plans to return to their stations when the way opens. How like the true spirit of Christianity! It refuses to look too long at the distressing sights which the present provides, and insists upon planning for a future that is full of hope and ultimate victory. These ambassadors of our Lord know that nothing which the war-lords of aggressor nations can do will ever enslave permanently those who have entered into that liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free. Just as Paul got up from the roadside near Lystra where he had been left for dead, and went back into that same city to preach, so the cause of Christ has frequently startled its enemies who thought it dead or dying, by springing to its feet and reasserting itself with greatly renewed power and influence. For this, we should constantly thank God.

I am also grateful today for the growing conviction that religion, if it is to be of any value, must be genuine and not a matter of surface appearances. As the bursting bombs on London and Cologne have revealed the quality of the buildings in those cities, even so have the terrible days in which we are living revealed the depth and sincerity of our religion. Religious stubble will no more withstand the hard and trying circumstances of this present crisis than will material stubble remain intact beneath the terrific pounding of an aerial blitzkrieg. A nation is not prepared to face its hour of supreme testing triumphantly, it matters not how complete its material and physical equipment may be, unless its spiritual resources are sufficient to meet the needs of its people.

We may deplore the debunking processes that have been at work in some areas of human interest in recent years, but none of us can honestly regret that such processes have put us, as Christians, on our guard. We need the challenge which the probing, critical minds of our day provide. It is rather essential that we should be subjected to the necessity of demonstrat-

ing whether or not our religion is sincere and true, and these experiences of frequent self-examination constitute a tremendously helpful means of attaining vital Christianity. Many of those who have suffered nervous and mental collapse amidst the awful anxiety of this hour, are those who failed in the more peaceful days to store up within themselves those divine resources that make men able to face any emergency. Along with some conquered nations, they find themselves too late, with too little.

A well-known seminary president in the middlewest contracted a fatal disease several years ago, and when he asked the doctors to be frank with him and reveal his actual condition, they hesitated, fearing that the truth might be more than he could stand. Noticing their hesitancy, he said to them, "Gentlemen, tell me the truth. My religion is equal to that." How fortunate he was, that in his hour of greatest need, he possessed a faith that was able to see him through any crisis that might come. Such spiritual undergirding and reinforcement is needed by us all, but only genuine religion is capable of providing these things.

And now, finally, among the priceless intangibles for which I am profoundly grateful this morning, is the growing assurance that God alone holds the key to the puzzling conditions of our day. We have tried so many panaceas in our efforts to solve the world's problems, and most of them have failed, until now, at last, men are beginning to see the wisdom of heeding the suggestion contained in that little book, entitled, "Why Not Try God?" He alone possesses the wisdom and foresight that is required to lead us out of our darkness into light, and we know that if we shall turn to Him in simple faith, He will, in all these things, make us "more than conquerors through him that loved us."

The story is told of a little girl who had been evacuated from London to a home in the rural section of England. On her first night in the country, the lady of the house helped the child prepare for bed, and finally said to her, "My dear, if you will kneel down now, I will hear your prayers just as your mother would do at home." The child began by repeating her "Now I lay me down to sleep", and then continued, "Bless Mommy and Daddy, and protect them from the bombs;" and at last she added, "And God, do take care of yourself, because if anything should happen to you, we're sunk!" There is far more spiritual insight in that conclusion than probably appears on the surface. Today, amidst the bursting shells and the cannons' roar, we can hear that "still, small voice", saying, "This is the way; walk ye in it."

"There is a Guide who never falters,
And where He leads we cannot stray,
For step by step, He goes before us
And marks our paths; He knows the way."

PRAYER: Eternal Father of all men, Lord of the ages and comforter of Thy children when they are in need, be near us as we bring the inner longings of our hearts to Thee in prayer. Thou art everloving; teach us to love. Thou art full of compassion; give us compassion like Thine. In Thee the sinful and the sorrowing find the spirit which guides them to goodness and sustains them in their grief.

In these days of confusion and trial, O God, be with this land that its people may seek Thy will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give wisdom to her leaders and may her sons have courage when they are tested.

May this nation and every nation be united by a faith that "sees beyond the years" and seeks above all blessings the kingship of the Master of men in every heart.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

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