How Far Have We Fallen? (Part One)

Gradual Deterioration
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Isaiah 5:20-21 gives us insight into the times that we are now living in, showing us that these verses describe what happened before in Israel, and we are living in a modern parallel of it in the United States:

Isaiah 5:20-21 Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who put darkness for light, and light for darkness; who put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and prudent in their own sight!

In other words, almost everything seems upside down and backwards from what it once was here in the United States. How many times have I remarked from this pulpit and privately in conversations with others regarding how greatly things have changed since I was a schoolboy growing up in the thirties, forties and fifties? Sometimes I have thought to myself that my saying this is simply a result of growing old, and that every generation of persons, as they grow old, says essentially the same things. I know that this is at least somewhat true, and even in the Bible, Jesus quotes a local proverb that said, "The old is better."

David Grabbe sent me a Stratfor report this week written by George Friedman. He is considered to be quite knowledgeable in his field, which is in the area of international economics and politics. His article considered the vast changes that have taken place in the American political scene in the past 40 years. His conclusion is that they—40 years ago—were every bit as corrupt then, but in a somewhat different way that magnifies the differences between candidates for office now and then. Today, both candidates and their followers are rigidly combative against each other, so that now a fair compromise is virtually impossible.

What I am saying is that since I was a boy and a young man, merely living on a day-to-day basis has changed greatly. One of the major causes of the radical change is because travel, as by airplane, and seeing and hearing, as by electronic communication, allows information to be spread more quickly than ever before in history. Rapid change is not merely stressful but seriously confusing, and often the major victims in such a circumstance are truth and righteousness. Information flows so rapidly that one's mind and conduct lose track of right standards as they become blurred.

Isaiah describes a time when the process of change was much more gradual and slower, because the flow of information was restricted to the pace that people could walk and travel by horseback to spread information. And thus, a major difference between our and Isaiah's time is the speed with which information, ideas, plans, habits, customs, and much more moves from person to person and nation to nation. And as information flows, gradual adjustments are made in belief, conduct, and attitude. It is inevitable that they occur.

Historically, the changes are almost always downward in terms of quality, and this is because that's the way human nature operates. For example, formality turns into informality, righteousness to unrighteousness, discretion to indiscretion, politeness to impoliteness, from discipline to recklessness, and on and on it goes. Unless the changes are strongly resisted, the changes eventually overwhelm a culture and thus become the culture's "normal." It happens in every nation and empire,
until a revolution reverses the deterioration to some degree. Thus today, homosexuality, lesbianism and same-sex marriage are today's normal. It did not used to be that way. It is today.

The subject came to mind because I read the lead article in the latest Whistleblower magazine, in which the author, David Kupelian, recounted how today's cultural scene in America corresponds to a storyline that occasionally appeared in Superman comics. One of Superman's occasional adversaries was a character named Bizarro. Bizarro stood for and supported every bad characteristic that Superman fought against. He was Superman's evil opposite, and he was precisely identical to Isaiah 5:20. Everything in his world was backwards and upside down regarding right and wrong, good and evil.

Kupelian used that illustration to define the difference between the culture that he grew up in during the fifties and sixties—he grew up right near Washington, D.C.—compared to what is becoming ever more normal today. I have had much the same experience, so that I've said a number of times to you, "I have no words to describe the differences to you between my boyhood and today."

Here is a simple, easily prove example regarding a fashion. Find a grainy, old timey picture of people attending a major league baseball game in the twenties and thirties. You are going to find that the majority of the fans were dressed formally, even in suits with white shirts and ties. It was the fashion.

In the summer of 1947, I worked at the Pittsburgh Pirates Major League Baseball Park, selling whatever they assigned me for the day. By then, people were no longer wearing suits with ties to the games, but the attire was still nice casual. Compare that with the entire worn to today's major league games. Richard and I just went to one a couple months ago in Pittsburgh. It is still informal, but in many cases it is downright sloppy. Attire can hardly get more informal.

Do you understand one aspect of what this simple decline is signaling? There is a saying that clothing, like money, talks. In this case, it is signaling a lessening of respect towards each other, and at one and the same time, an increasing disrespect of what others may think. Therefore, the tendency is toward self-centeredness—just do anything.

This sort of gradual decline is what Jesus warns of in the letters that He gave to the seven churches in Revelation 2—3. Spiritual declines gradually slipped into all of the congregations except for Smyrna and Philadelphia. Sardis was so bad, Jesus said it's dead. In like manner, declines in one's respect for God can be witnessed in the scattered congregations today, as some of you have witnessed.

Now, back to the clothing illustration. Even in the Bible, clothing is an outward symbol of the measure of one's respect for others: for an institution, for an office, for one's own family, or even for oneself. Clothing is not unimportant in terms of a witness, and God clearly shows it is not unimportant in regard to coming before Him. He demands, through strong commands, what the priests should wear when they came before him. Are you readying to become a priest? Are you before Him? He demands respect for Him, as shown outwardly by the clothing that He required that they wear before Him. He immediately slew Aaron's sons when they did not appear before Him in the right mental state, and sure enough, they did something pretty terrible.

Lack of respect regarding clothing has not been a problem in the Church of the Great God, but it has been a problem in some of the other scattered groups. Some other groups' members are very
informally dressed for Sabbath services, so that they give clear signals that they have forgotten that they are in the presence of God, and therefore they have little respect for Him in that setting. Do they really see God?

We do have a problem, though. It is not with how we are attired. But some folks cannot go through an entire service without a cup of coffee in front of them. And that is, in this man's judgment, just as disrespectful as a lack of right attire. It certainly does not align with what is clearly taught in the book of holiness. Do you know which book that is? It is Leviticus. So maybe some of us need to ask ourselves: Do we really see God and the level of respect we must have when we come before Him in the church services' formal setting?