

Hard Up

or the Modest Newsletter Written *Entirely* by Joel

Instructions for the Bash

Read the *Meno* entirely. Also read “Up from Liberalism,” by Richard Weaver.

Dinner Conversation: A Play in One Act

By Joel Zartman

Dramatis Personae

Winkin

Blinkin

Nod

Small Italian Woman

Richard Mitchell

Richard Weaver

Chorus (consisting of reasonable people such as Socrates, Richard Mitchell, Richard Weaver, Owen Barfield, Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Aquinas)

One day Winkin, Blinkin and Nod went to church and sang “Grace Greater Than Our Sin.” Afterward, they went home to an excellent meal at the farm and had a conversation about the song.

Winkin: I wondered about the music which seemed light for what the song was saying. I was thinking this during the second stanza which managed to descend in gravity beneath the music. Or at least it managed to seem to me that it did.

Blinkin: It did seem that there was something not quite right.

Exit Nod. Enter Nod with a hymnbook.

Winkin: It’s number 666 in that book.

Nod: Here’s the text:

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured--
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilt.

Winkin: this stanza makes one assertion: grace is outpoured.

Blinkin: Are you sure it says that?

Winkin: “Outpoured” is the verb isn’t it?

Nod: No, it isn’t any verb. It is describing the condition of the grace, but the activity is over.

Winkin: Where is the verb?

Small Italian Woman: There is no verb. Try to diagram that stanza. There’s no verb there. There are only fake verbs. There is no sentence.

Richard Mitchell: No predication!

Blinkin: The plot thickens. This doesn’t look right at all.

Nod: Why can’t it be saying that grace is greater than our sin, that is the title. Maybe this is

poetic?

Winkin: I don't think poetry goes beyond the rules of grammar and reason unless it does so at the point where these are inadequate. It seeks a more specific expression where there is a limitation, but it is breaking out, a way of transcending the limits, not of sinking beneath.

Blinkin: This is a sinking beneath!

Winkin: I think the author was fooled by the same thing that fooled me at first. This is not very competent. Without predication you have said nothing. This is a non-statement about grace. It is constructed to look like something is being stated when nothing, in fact, is. I take a very dim view of this. It could either be incompetent, or deliberate.

Blinkin: This is incompetence. The author is trying to bluff their way through. They're trying to write about something without being definite. They're faking.

Nod: Surely you are being unnecessarily hard. You expect too much.

Blinkin: Try it. Try to make sense out of this stanza. Try to say the connections are definite, that the descriptions are vivid and helpful and give you a sense that something has been accomplished when you think about the words. The more I try, the more I am convinced the whole thing is ingeniously designed to repel logical analysis, to defy coherent understanding, to frustrate clear thinking. This is not in the interest of true religion.

Winkin: How can we offer up a counterfeit to the Lord? Our God is particularly averse to fakes.

Nod: Lets try to get more of the context:

Sin and despair, like the sea waves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is greater--yes, grace untold--
Points to the Refuge, the mighty Cross.

Winkin: How does grace point? I thought grace was the solution! Sin threatens, despair threatens we are in peril of infinite loss. Suddenly a grace powered neon sign lights up the sky: Cross Here! Oh, maybe she means an old rugged sign at the crossroads in the middle of the sea. But does this really help?

Nod: And this brings up the question of what it means to me, or what it means to you.

Blinkin: This is not a valid question. It means. The question is what does it mean?

Winkin: But what if it isn't specific enough because the author isn't really sure what they want it to mean? That's when you start debating the sign.

Nod: It is rich with veiled meaning?

Blinkin: This is not a richness of meaning. It is called noxious ambiguity or unhelpfully clever enigmatical communication. I think the author didn't have a clear enough idea to put it to you straight. It is incompetent and another reason why I think she's trying to bluff her way through it.

Nod: Now you are exaggerating. Wasn't this the stanza where it sank in gravity beneath the music?

Winkin: Well then, how *does* grace point?

Nod: Well, grace points by many ways, doesn't it?

Winkin: NONONONONONO. How does *she* say grace points? Grace turns you toward the refuge, but having it *point* in the middle of the sea is hard going. Here is another . . . what did you call it?

Blinkin: Noxious ambiguity.

Winkin: Precisely. Here was the feeling of substance, but substance was not there. She is conjuring up the effect without the real thing.

Small Italian Woman: It is sentimental! [*She holds her hand close to her body, with the palm up, and then moves it abruptly upward and away from herself.*]

Nod: Not everybody would take it that way.

Winkin: Enough of this relativism! It is or it is not. Clearly, this author is one for foundering. What's the next verse?

Nod:

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide,
 What can avail to wash it away?
 Look! There is flowing a crimson tide--
 Whiter than snow you may be today.

Blinkin: Melodramatic. Asking the question of line two is one thing. Shouting "Look!" in answer to something you set up is altogether melodramatic. Melodrama is when something is flagrantly inauthentic. You can tell because it is obvious it is rigged. I don't think God seeks inauthentic worship. If this stanza stood alone, another interpretation might be put on it. But with my understanding of the first two stanzas to serve as an indication of the general tendencies this author exhibits, I don't think this is an unwarranted direction.

Small Italian Woman: It is sentimental!

Richard Weaver: The trouble with this stanza is the switch from the first person pronoun to the second. That is what makes it melodramatic. At the beginning you share the predicament. Then you descry the solution. Then you urge it on your companion? If you were in the same predicament you would say "whiter than snow *we* may be." The only thing that needs to change is the last pronoun. The trouble is that this would ruin the whole point of view of the song. Consider the last stanza.

Nod:

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
 Freely bestowed on all who believe!
 You that are longing to see His face,
 Will you this moment His grace receive?

Winkin: Ah! It makes the "Look!" sound affected. Melodramatic.

Blinkin: By now, if you can ascribe any sincerity to this author you are probably too naive to be allowed outside on your own.

Exit Nod.

Winkin: But she still offers the question for our consideration. Are you longing to see the Lord?

Blinkin: You know, this piece says very little about the Lord. It is about grace and now all of the sudden we are longing for the Lord's face? Shouldn't it somehow connect the Lord's face with his grace? Not that we would expect *this* piece to do that for us.

Small Italian Woman: It is sentimental!

Winkin: It is very indefinite.

Blinkin: I think the Small Italian Woman keeps saying it is sentimental precisely for that reason. There is no hardness to it. You can get more definite meaning out of a hand gesture. The first stanza is a washout. The rest of them don't give you the idea that the author is really captivated by grace. It is a causal approach to saying something profound. Clearly unacceptable.

Winkin: Is Nod getting dessert?

Chorus: Here we are, out on the farm,

singing and partly singing,
 but nevertheless we must think.
 As for this song here debated,
 one ought to do better than that.

THE END

Chernow, Ron. *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller Sr.*
A Sort of Book Review by Joel Zartman

Ron Chernow appears to be a very eminent biographer who specializes in telling the story of great merchants, although his latest book is on Alexander Hamilton.

I think the title of this work on Rockefeller is telling. One wouldn't think Rockefeller counts for so much, but Chernow considers him among the greatest merchants ever. It is a very interesting book that has a lot of ideas that I want to work out better. I think it is a masterpiece. I've been reading quite a few biographies recently. I have enjoyed the genre all my life. Whether I'm qualified to judge or not is another matter, but I think this one is very good. And I think Rockefeller was a mighty titan.

Chernow offers Rockefeller's "Evangelical Baptism" (*i.e.* the fact that Rockefeller was a Baptist of the conservative variety) as the key to understanding why he considers him a combination of sinfulness and sanctity. He says that from the beginning of the book and has a good bit of elaboration of this on tape 3 (you can check this out from the Brookdale library and there is much about the period of history in this work which anybody interested in the early days of fundamentalism will find useful). Rockefeller was unscrupulous in business. At one point Chernow remarks (not having the bound volume is a bit of a drag) that after his first shady dealings with the venal government of Pennsylvania, Rockefeller spent the next thirty years of his life running from the law. And after Ida Tarbell exposed his shady practices and created all the public outrage against him, Rockefeller had to implement some pretty drastic security measures, even going to far as to leave the country for a while. It was business at the most calculating and ruthless, and all by a temperance advocating, Sunday-school teaching, unextravagant lifelong member of a Baptist church. Chernow argues not that cheating allowed Rockefeller to get ahead, but that Rockefeller would have been ahead even had he not engaged in controversial practices. Rockefeller decidedly was not above reproach, but he always seemed to believe he was and used his religion to justify what he did. He married capitalism and Christianity with himself as the exemplar of this winning combination.

Rockefeller was given \$5 to read the Bible all the way through, early on, and I offer this bald statement for the sake of those who have children and are concerned about this sort of thing. See what it does to people? Anyway . . . Rockefeller was a Baptist from very early on. He was a model Baptist, it seems, giving regularly, attending regularly,* volunteering for everything from janitorial duties to teaching Sunday School. He measured up by all the standards of active spirituality of the day. Chernow remarks that Rockefeller believed that the friendly hand extended to the man who doesn't know that he is wanted brings men to church. Rockefeller also thought the temporal affairs of the church should be run like a tidy business, which I find rather ironic, considering what underhanded practices he perpetrated. He sounds like a model fundamentalist. Chernow believes the religion of Rockefeller's youth encouraged his career and

his avid pursuit of wealth because Rockefeller was taught that religion and prosperity go hand in hand.

Now I speculate, but it seems to me that this view of religion, where stewardship is mentioned with sanctimonious regularity, along with prudence as a euphemism for greed, is not altogether so remote. I don't think Chernow is waxing unduly imaginative. The man who would be rich must be thrifty - this is the same idea of not wasting time in order to have the most of it, and something Chernow ties back to the Puritans, although he finds some Puritan misgivings as well: "Religion begot prosperity and the daughters devoured the mother" - Cotton Mather.

We live in a country that has achieved prosperity and is devoted to increasing it. Just listen to George Bush talk, just wander through the Mall of America, just look at the cars we drive, just count the number of electronic devices that we consider indispensable, just spend money to keep our economy growing.

What is it that makes the use and regulation of money so important that it is attached to religion above many other things? What I want to consider is how saving money is considered closer to holiness than spending it without a thought for tomorrow. And I think it has to do with the avoidance of the evil of dissipation and prodigality, which are bad things. Rockefeller was a model of temperance, restraint, wholesome exercise (ice skated daily in the winter), not going to the theater, not given to living extravagantly, keeping the Sabbath and practicing an almost indecent frugality except when it came to philanthropic endeavors (which endeavors were done with care and study). He had no vices . . . saving avarice. His life was devoted to only one deadly sin, and so what was remarkable about his life was how free of vice he appeared. Aquinas cites Chrysostom to show that the virtue that avarice is opposed to is justice (from a Homily on Matthew). In Rockefeller's life, this is true; look at how many lawyers worked for him. Read Chernow's assessment of the fallout of the great trial in 1911.

Rockefeller's known business practices allow us to be more than a little cynical about his philanthropy, for if we are to consider these things we have to explain his philanthropy one way or another. One is tempted to think that his philanthropies were, like all the rest of this life, another shrewd calculation. Chernow shows him to be a very deliberate, careful, thorough and calculating person indeed. And I think these things reveal how monstrous sin can make us. Rockefeller's devotion to one sin reveals that he had great stature, capable of being either a great saint, or a great sinner. What would he have become had he been devoted to justice instead? He would have been a human being certainly, rather than the grotesque enlargement of something perverted beyond human proportions into a Titan. Perhaps he would have become a god. One may object, for a person has a right to private property and may dispose of it as one wishes. This I do not deny. But I don't believe that any man is at once both a great sinner and a great saint. Some may think of David, but David's sins were uncharacteristic lapses, not the tendency of all his life, which tendency is demonstrated in his repentance. David was a great saint. Paul was a great sinner, but he became a great saint and was not both simultaneously. There wasn't a lifelong coexistence of antithetical activities. In Rockefeller's case, the philanthropy can be explained in such a way as to show it was nothing antithetical either, alas! Chernow seems to believe that Rockefeller rationalized his unscrupulous practices and deceived himself, as the rest of the country did, by refusing to admit to any wrongdoing and then basking in the glow of his reputation as a philanthropist after the fines and the fragmentation of his monopoly only served to make him richer. I do not think the philanthropies were a shrewd calculation. I think Rockefeller refused to acknowledge his wrong, and learned to deceive himself while getting

encouragement from the circumstances. His upright character did not follow him into old age. He drifted in his religion toward more liberal views. His conduct degenerated so that women could not ride beside him on his excursions without being safe from the excursions of his hands.

I think the trouble is that we think of frugality as more fundamental than magnanimity, as though frugality were not predicated on magnanimity. But I wonder if frugality isn't a means and magnanimity the end. If this is true, then we err when we make frugality an end in itself. It is the same way with worship and evangelism. Some seem to think evangelism is more fundamental than worship, not realizing that evangelism is predicated on worship. Evangelism, as Piper so admirably puts it, exits because worship doesn't. Worship is forever, evangelism is not. It is the same with frugality. Scripture teaches that thieves ought to work, and it tells these former thieves *why* they should work. They are to cultivate a certain magical fruit whose virtue lies in a healing power that will (as it were) restore their soul. Magnanimity is fundamental. Thieves need to become generous. Frugality exits in order to make for generosity. But generosity outlasts and outshines frugality: see the episode of the widow's mite (O Lord make me extravagant and truly rich like that blessed widow who had so little and had so much!), for there comes a time when we have, and can give.

Rockefeller practiced self-denial all his life. He lived for avarice because he hoarded up his money sedulously, spending it where he needed to, but living for the figures, for the stacks of coin, for possessing for possessing. It was an idol that consumed him and cheated him and made him falsely great. He was magnanimous with a false magnanimity, for he never redressed the wrongs he perpetrated the way Zacheus did. Rockefeller salved his conscience and saved his reputation. He held on to the ill gotten gain for all that he gave so much away.

God is our only true possession. He is the only thing substantial enough to be truly had. Having God we have all things, for God is true wealth, as that widow knew. All things proceed from God, like rivers; and like rivers all things are enjoyed as God gives them, their water passing through our hands, enjoyed but never grasped. We cannot hold on to any of the things in this world. The only thing we do have for ever, is our soul, our innermost being, the growing shape of our character which will last forever. Had Rockefeller been a saint he would have been the channel of prosperity passing through. He would have been refreshing and substantial. I wonder if he didn't make himself a mighty dam with a lake behind him for himself, a dam that created a dry land with a little stream. The people of the land were glad, in the drought, for the stream, but it was nothing like the river. Let justice flow like a river, broad and swift in its current. For the wealth of justice is better far than the wealth of capital. It is more lasting than stone cathedrals, more good for the land than a thousand universities. Thy justice, O God, is like mountains! Let those who are like thee be everlasting hills.

*It is curious to begin making connections, and it is one of the reasons I engage in these exploratory wanderings off topic when it comes to research. While Rockefeller Sr. began attending this church almost three decades before this date, I have a clipping from the February 17, 1917 of the New York Times that lists the services in New York. Besides the fact that Harry Emerson Fosdick was going to preach at the chapel at Union Seminary there is the interesting announcement that the Rev. Cornelius Woelfkin would preach at the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church. Rockefeller Jr. would later move from the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church where he taught Sunday School for a long while and became good friends with Fosdick . . . and you know the rest of the story. Fosdick, by the way, was the minister at Rockefeller Sr.'s funeral.