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And diff'ring judgments serve but to declare
That truth lies somewhere, if we knew but where.

William Cowper, "Hope"

Buy the truth, and do not sell it;
Buy wisdom, instruction, and understanding.

Proverbs 23:23 ESV



1 The Marketplace

Then I saw in my dream that they had left the wilderness and entered a town where there was a fair that continued all year long. . . . The name of the town was Vanity, and the fair was Vanity Fair. The people of the town were vain, caring for nothing but money, pleasure, and fame. The town was very old, and the fair had been going for many, many years.

Almost five thousand years ago, pilgrims, on their way to the Celestial City, went through this town. Finally, Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion, with their laborers, set up this fair to provide every kind of entertainment for travelers and to sell all types of merchandise all year long. And still, at this fair is sold such merchandise as fine houses, lands, stocks and bonds, false security, gay clothing, jewelry, expensive cosmetics, gold and silver, antiques, pearls, precious stones, fame, fortunes, reputations, virtue, honor, popularity, positions, phony titles, counterfeit degrees, contests, chances, games, votes, elections, government offices, personal influences, padded reports, propaganda, falsehoods, fictitious news, deceptions, artificial personalities, schemes, tricks, comics, beauty queens, sex appeal, prostitutes, human lives, and souls of men.

Moreover, at this fair at all times are gambling, juggling, cheating, defrauding, embezzling, lying, stealing, swindling, rogues, knaves, libertines, carnivals, festivities, drinking, revelries, conniving, fools, thugs, lewd women, murders, adulteries, and all kinds of immoralities. The broad road that leads to destruction

BUYER BEWARE

which brings the fair much trade lies through the town.

And in this town of Vanity are taverns, night clubs, roadhouses, seductive shows, popular casinos, culture societies, fashionable churches, synthetic Christians, sectarian denominational segregation, professional pastors (using mass psychology, setting themselves up as lords over God's heritage, ruling their congregations for "filthy lucre," beating and fleecing their flocks instead of feeding them or setting them a good example). There are also famous pseudo scientists, charlatan physicians, clandestine bookmakers, racketeers—impostors of all kinds.

But, if anyone going to the Celestial City would miss this town of Vanity, he must of necessity go out of the world. The Prince of Peace, when here on earth, went through this town to His own country; and this same Beelzebub was then—as now—lord of the fair. He tried to sell the Prince many of his vanities. He even offered to make him manager of the fair. Because the Prince was such an influential person, Beelzebub led Him from section to section and showed Him all the various nations of the world and promised to make Him ruler over all, if He would but cheapen himself and buy some of his vanities. But the Prince did not care for any of the merchandise, and He left the town without spending a penny for any of Beelzebub's goods.

Now, as soon as Christian and Faithful entered the fair they created a sensation, not only in the fair but throughout the town.

First, their dress was so different from the people of the place that everyone gazed at them. Some said they were crank; some called them outlandish others said they were there to create trouble.

Second, their speech was different. Few could understand what they said, for naturally they spoke the language of Canaan, while those who kept the fair were men of this world. From one end of the fair to the other, they seemed like barbarians.

Third, these pilgrims showed no interest in their goods, and this worried the people of the fair most. Christian and Faithful did not even care to see them, and when they were asked to buy they would stop up their ears and say, "Turn away my eyes from beholding vanity," (Psalm 119:37 KJV) looking upward as if they belonged to another country.

One who had already heard of the men, observing their peculiar behavior,

mockingly said to them, "What will you buy?" Then they fastened their eyes upon him and said, "We buy the truth."

Those words from the pen of John Bunyan were first published in 1678, but they are amazingly apropos for the twenty-first century. As this part of the adventure begins, Christian, the main character of *Pilgrim's Progress*, is found traveling with his friend, Faithful. Bunyan, using allegory, gave each of his characters specific names that exemplify certain attributes. This great teacher wanted each part of the journey to reveal some aspect of our travels with the Savior, this side of glory.

"Christian," for example, is the story's protagonist and represents each one of us after we come to faith in Jesus Christ. Early in the story, Christian was called "Graceless" as he did not yet know the amazing grace offered to all because of what was done on Calvary's cross.

But Graceless's name changes after he meets "Evangelist" (a perfect name for one who is willing to share the Truth of God's Word, or *evangelize*), who introduces him to "the book" (the Bible) and starts Graceless (now Christian) on the way to the Celestial City (heaven).

Evangelist and Christian soon part, and Christian is joined by a new companion, Faithful. But these two Pilgrims soon find that their path necessarily takes them right through a long-standing fair called "Vanity Fair." Bunyan chose to underscore the words of Ecclesiastes by pointing out the "vanity" of this world when he gave the fair its name. But Bunyan also wanted to convey something else: We Pilgrims can't get to the Celestial City (heaven) without going through Vanity Fair. It is part of the journey, and it is unavoidable. You and I, fellow Pilgrim, must also pass through this lusty "fair."

In truth, when John Bunyan wrote about Vanity Fair, he could have been writing about our culture today. He noted that people at "the fair" cared for nothing but fame, money, and pleasure. Harkening again to Ecclesiastes, Bunyan intimates that there is "nothing new under the sun" (Ecclesiastes 1:9 NIV) by noting that the fair has been around for a long time. Humankind has been chasing after these vanities, and many more

like them, since time immemorial. Sadly, we recognize that there are those who are always readily available to “sell” shabby goods (bad ideas) and just as many “customers” willing to “buy” them.

Have you ever visited a real marketplace? My husband and I have been in many in various places around the world. I remember the first time we visited the Old City in Jerusalem. As we walked under the arches that covered the cobblestone streets from the time the Romans occupied that great city, we moved past burlap bags filled with colorful spices. The smell of fresh fish and newly baked bread punctuated the air. Shop after shop, stacked tightly next to each other, lined one narrow street after another. Baskets, jewelry, olive oil, leather goods, caftans—all kinds of trinkets hung from the doorways, giving the potential customer no shortage of opportunities to buy.

Merchants pushed their carts up and down the smooth stones, trod by so many for thousands of years. Shopkeepers would come out of their little stores and shout, “You want to buy? You *American*? I give you good price!”

The average tourist learns quickly that charlatans abound and the same kind of merchandise can cost one price at one shop and be markedly more or less expensive at another shop around the corner.

If you don’t know where you are going or what you are looking for, you can quickly lose your way. It is very easy to feel overwhelmed and out of your comfort zone. Being a successful shopper in the Old City requires a certain amount of grit and boldness measured with just the right amount of American diplomacy. No tourist ever wants to represent the “ugly American.” And no one can go to Jerusalem *without* visiting the marketplace. It is simply a part of the journey.

But just like any traveler can quickly lose their way in the Old City, the “vanities” Bunyan wrote about can take any Pilgrim off the straight and narrow path. The apostle John knew this when he wrote, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 John 2:16 KJV).

The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—the prince of this world still uses the same tried and tested areas of entice-

ment to get us off the path. There really is “nothing new under the sun.”

Bunyan readily identified some of those lusts, recognizing that “No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man” (1 Corinthians 10:13 ESV). While he was writing in the late 1600s, Bunyan could just as easily have been writing about the same sins that plague us in the twenty-first century—lying, drunkenness, gossiping, sexual immorality, and even murder, just to name a few.

Let’s face it: Vanity Fair was and still is a rough place.

The reformed tinker knew that people would gravitate toward carnal pleasures; he pointed out hypocrisy in the Church and recognized that mandate for Christian character and how easily its absence could be detected.

Let’s face it: Vanity Fair *was* and still *is* a rough place. Surely Christian and Faithful would have preferred the gentle countryside that lay not far from the fair. After all, who really wants to go into all that messy stuff—the shouting, the stealing, the lying, the sexual promiscuity, the turning of Truth on its head?

There was no delight for these two Pilgrims in being ridiculed by the merchants of Vanity Fair for the way they dressed. Even the way they spoke was mocked. Bunyan said they “spoke the language of Canaan” but the merchants were men of the world. Remember how Bunyan himself had struggled in this area? Profanity and vulgarity peppered the merchants’ speech—but not Christian’s and Faithful’s.

Most infuriating of all to the street venders was the reality that the two Pilgrims showed no interest in the merchandise being sold at the fair. It didn’t take long for the “sellers” to note that the Pilgrims were not “buyers.” Christian and Faithful were mocked, derided, marginalized, and ridiculed.

Fellow Pilgrim, there is no way around it. Our Pilgrim’s progress will necessarily take us right through Vanity Fair. In fact, that is exactly where we are told to go.

God was gracious in preserving His Word, a very personal conversation between the Father and His Son. In John 17, we quietly lean in to hear a passionate prayer of the Savior to His Father for His disciples. Jesus says:

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. *My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.* For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. (John 17:13–19 NIV, emphasis added)

There it is—no way around it. Our journey takes us right through Vanity Fair (the world)—and that is exactly where Jesus is sending us! But *why?*

Listen to our travelers' response. As the merchants were shouting, mocking, and ridiculing, demanding that the Pilgrims “buy” what the fair was “selling,” Christian and Faithful offered a marvelous and challenging retort. They stated simply and powerfully, “We only buy the *Truth*.”

That declaration carries two profound realities. First, Christian and Faithful were able to recognize the distinction and the difference between the shabby “goods” the fair was selling from the authentic principles and precepts of what God has freely given us.

Their declaration also connotes that someone, somewhere, in that carnal carnival had a booth set up where only Truth, *real* Truth was being offered. It might not be the most visited stall at the fair. But curiosity seekers, skeptics, cynics, agnostics, atheists, secularists, and humanists would at least pass by the booth. Others might stop and quietly observe from afar. And yes, some would even linger long enough to really

scrutinize and possibly accept what was being offered for free: Truth—absolute, unchanging, immutable. But someone has to “man the booth.”

So let’s go visit Vanity Fair together. We’ll visit the booths and see for ourselves what is being bought and sold. Come and study the counterfeit goods being offered in the public square today so that you can better know how to offer the countervailing gift of Truth.

While we journey, let’s remember the mandate that takes us right into the heart of the marketplace. It is concise and clear. The call is to “*Go and Tell*,” offering to anyone who will listen what we ourselves have been given. We will learn how to deliver that message in equal amounts of Truth and kindness. Will it be easy? Was it smooth sailing for Christian and Faithful? Bunyan writes that while the two Pilgrims behaved themselves so well, “taking their disgrace and shame with such meekness and patience, that several of the witnesses were won to their side,” they were, nonetheless, thrown in jail.²

Judge Hategood would preside over their trial, and in the end Faithful would be executed. Bunyan writes, “Faithful died on the gallows, true to his convictions, sealing his testimony with his own blood.”³

Most of us won’t lose our lives when we venture into the marketplace of ideas, but it does remind us that this will be a challenging experience. Are you up for the challenge? Are you willing to go—when and where our Savior calls—even if it takes you out of your comfort zone and right into a lusty fair? If your answer is yes, then follow me!

In the morning of grace, when the Sun first arose,
And the Gospel divine put to flight all its foes,
The nations rejoiced, but forsook it so soon,
For the Sun in His strength was darkened at noon.

Light breaks at last! Hallelujah to God!
Darkness is past, let us shout it aloud:
From the mountains and hills let us gather the few
Who will stand for the right, and dare to be true.⁴