"SPIRITUAL LENSES"

Baccalaureate Sermon Delivered by Dr. Paul E. Titsworth to the Senior Class of Washington College June 14, 1925.

TEXT: (Amos VIII, 3.)—"And the Lord Said Unto Amos, What Seest Thou?"

Sight is a precious gift of God, I suspect that you and I would prefer, if compelled to choose, to be bereft of almost any other sense. Our daily bread depends largely upon it. Our feeling at home in the world comes from it. Our pleasures proceed in large measure out of it. Happiness itself is made up to a great degree out of what we have seen and stored away in our hearts.

Having once seen, can you ever forget the Chesapeake at sunset with its rose and its gold, its purple, lavender, and heliotrope, its iris and daffodil tints? Having once seen, can you ever forget the illuminated dome of the Capitol in Washington as it raises like a dream in alabaster above the darkling trees? Or a baby's first smile when the very gates of heaven seem to swing open for you? Having once seen can you ever forget the angry Atlantic lashed into fury by a storm? Such impressions you deposit in the bank of memory against the time of visual poverty.

Wonderful as the eye is, you and I are not satisfied with, yea, can not rely upon, its unaided performance. Indeed, with this as with other human powers we have to supplement nature. Instead of crushing our enemy with the fist, we demolish him by a shell shot seventy miles from a gigantic gun. "With our airplanes we outfly the bird. With our submarines, we outswim the whale." So with our lenses we outsee the eagle.

I suspect we do not realize how great a contribution the lense, one of man's most marvelous inventions, makes to our health, and happiness. Without it, some of us would be as good as blind. The photographic lense brings the uttermost parts of the earth near to us. It discloses the mysteries of the ocean bottom. It preserves for us the features of these dear faces which have long mingled with the dust.

A high-power lense shows us that every drop of roadside ditch-water is a community with a teeming population, its loves and its hates, and its mortal struggles for existence. The lense of the microscope it is that enables the researcher to discover the composition of the blood, of the body tissues, and to isolate disease germs and discover their habits. Thus, our increasing control of disease, the saving of thousands of human lives, and the safe-guarding of thousands more is made possible by just a bit of glass rightly compounded and carefully ground.

With the lense not only can we peer into God's microcosm—His world of little things—out we can pierce the magnificient distances of his macrocosm —His world of stupendous reaches and forces. Go out some clear night when the sky is studded with stars. If you know where to look you see Altair, our nearest star-neighbor, which is only 81 trillion miles away, and Arcturus, a little farther off, 145 trillion miles distant, and, within a stone's throw, celestially speaking, hangs Vega some 232 trillion miles removed from our earth. These, three of our closest planetary comrades, and more we can see with the naked eye.

While our unaided vision shows us stars of the sixth magnitude, the monster 100 inch reflecting telescope on Mount Wilson, California, which receives 160,000 times the light of the human eye, shows us stars of the twentieth magnitude. How many more there are we can not even surmise. This giant instrument brings into our vision heavenly bodies like the globular star cluster in the constellation of Hercules. This is so remote that the celestial blue book in despair gives up trying to tell us the mileage. It has to content itself by saying that these stars are 36,000 light years away. Now, when we consider that light travels 186,000 miles a second—it would go around the earth about seven times in that space—and that a light year—the measure of distance light will travel in a year, or 6 million million miles, the figures 36,000 light years become so staggering that we can no longer have any conception of the distance. And yet the lense of the telescope bridges this incomprehensible interstellar space, permitting us to look into the very back pastures of the universe.

When therefore we gaze at Hercules or peer into the bosom of the rain drop, we understand the Psalmist's exclamation, "What is man that thou art mindful of him and the son of man that thou visitest him!" Through the microscope and the telescope God is giving us new and astounding revelations of His power. And these revelations are enlarging and enriching our thoughts of Him, of man, and of destiny.

In this widening universe, with its stage setting of amoebas and distant suns, of bacteria and stars and clouds, with its actors the laws of energy and motion, right and wrong, art thou engulfed completely in the daily task or dost thou take time to look up at the stars, to be holy, to think and to worship? What seest thou?

What is this business of seeing, anyhow? The physiologist will tell you that any object you look at reflects light that, by the help of the visual nerves, photographs a series of images on your brain. But the psychologist will tell you that seeing is a much more complicated process.

Let us imagine an Australian bushman seeing for the first time an American flag flying proudly from a ship's masthead. To him it is nothing more than a bit of cloth which attracts him for its bright colors. Contrast the feelings of an American when he views the flag—particularly in a foreign land. I well remember with what ecstasy I once saw the Stars and Stripes floating from a venerable castle on the Rhine—the flag meant home and loved ones and the finest country the sun ever shone upon. The chances are that the images of the flag photographed on the brain of the bushman and on mine were practically identical but how great a difference in what we saw!

The actual brain picture of the starry banner was merely an outline sketch, supplemented and enriched in my case by thought, experience, ideals, and by a thousand memories.

To many an American soldier in the Great War, France was and is a land of easy morals, of continual rain, and of mud, mud, mud! His eyes rested on ancient battlefields, ruinous castles, venerable cathedrals, majestic mountains, even possibly on famous paintings and sculpture. Having eyes he saw not, while his comrade, knowing something of history, language, literature, and art found a hallowed land.

Seeing is vastly more than the mere physical act of gazing. For the man with an understanding heart to gaze upon Rheims Cathedral is the signal for an uprush of thought, memory, and emotion—like people running to a fire—to enlarge and enrich his vision. Thus seeing ceases being merely optical and becomes spiritual. Tennyson expressed a profound truth when he made venerable Ulysses exclaim at the end of a long life of wandering, "I am a part of all that I have met." The poet might have said that the old Greek was a part of all that he had seen and all that he had seen was a part of him.

What we see, how much we see, depends, therefore, not so much on an active visual nerve as upon an eager and understanding heart. Stand on the bridge of a Mississippi steamboat with the pilot. What looks to you like a sullen stream of muddy water, he reads like a guide-book and from a study of the color, current, and eddies, he can tell you where lie the shoals and the channel. Walk abroad with the geologist and what may look to you like just country will reveal to him an entrancing story whose actors are the cosmic forces of heat and cold and erosion. Step out into a summer evening with the astronomer and what seems to you like just another sky with a myriad pin-pricks of starry light, he reads like a delightful romance. If you are a philosopher, you, too, can find "sermons in stones, books in running brooks, and good in every thing?

You and I often having eyes see not. We are like a certain Peter Bell of whom Wordsworth wrote,

"A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him
And it was nothing more."

Let us be rather like the poet himself who declared,

"To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears."

Another thought in this connection. Real seeing is a matter of comparison of critical judgment, of sorting out the essential from the non-essential, and of piercing the husks and appearance to get at the realities. The first time I ever took my place on the driver's seat in a car, I was bewildered by the number of things—switches, gauges, and meters—on the dash. In the richness of my inexperience I thought they all had to be operated at once. I thought I ought to have a dozen hands. Early I found that only one or two demanded my immediate attention for driving purposes. I soon learned to see only those I needed. To a spectator watching his first football match, the game appears to be the last word in pandemonium—a mix-up of arms, legs, bodies, and then a few men running into each other like mad. Yet, a critical observer can soon pick out the pattern of any game. For him something of the plan of each team commander begins to emerge from the apparent chaos. His joy in looking on is partly that of seeing the wits of one side matched against the other. So, too, the careless onlooker at human life in our present age easily becomes bewildered, soured and hopeless. He can see only the confusion. The trained observer, recognizing much of the furore as externality and non-essential, sees beneath it a rational divine pattern for life. What seest thou?

What you and I need is spiritual lenses. Realizing long ago that the eye saw neither accurately enough nor far enough, we have ceased depending solely upon it. We are constantly correcting, refining, and extending its powers by the lense. Our untutored and unaided spiritual vision is not more adequate to our needs. It, too, must be supplemented and sharpened by high-power spiritual lenses. I should like to suggest three.

A sense of the beautiful is the first. Common experience proves, that normal folks shun ugliness and tend to gravitate toward what is beautiful. Some aggressive souls, not only are drawn to what is beautiful, but produce it for themselves and others. I remember once being impressed by the sentinel-box of a railroad crossing guard whose shelter was embowered with red rambler roses. What I am trying to get at is that every one of us—some more and some less—feels a natural hunger for the beautiful.

"I can not die who drink delight
From the cup of the crescent moon;
And hungrily, as men eat bread,
Love the scented nights of June."

sang one ecstatic lover of beauty.

The painter, the sculptor, the poet gaze upon like scenes with the rest of us. But by an enriched power of vision, by supplementing the normal eye by the lense of beauty, they find loveliness where we having eyes see not.

A lady said one day to the British painter Turner as she looked upon a picture of a sunset,

"I never saw any such colors in our English sky."

"Don't you wish you could?" was Turner's all-sufficient retort.

Several years ago an Irish girl, Myra Kelly, went into a wretched quarter of New York's East Side to teach in a ward school. Perhaps no more squalid, dirty, ragged, disease-ridden quarter exists in any city. Yet so impressed was she with the beauty of character which she met even in this tabernacle of moral and physical dirt that she wrote a series of stories to tell other folks about what she had found.

The glimpses of beauty which we catch now and then in flower and sky and human character and those the professional artist sees by the miracle of his genius are after all only a partial, imperfect vision of the beautiful reality which stands in its supernal splendor behind the world we see like a majestic statue yet unveiled. Our eyes fail to perceive the beautiful in the world, sometimes because they have not been taught to see, sometimes because they are befogged by the more apparent ugliness. The normal man has a right to expect that maturing experience will show him more and more the divine loveliness of the world and of human beings. Seeing increasingly only unloveliness and sordiness in your fellow men is spiritual disease. Increasingly being able to discern majesty and nobility in even the lowliest folks around you is spiritual vigor. What seest thou?

A sense of the beautiful helps us to pierce the haze of the commonplace and the clouds of pessimism, bitterness, and contempt and discern real grandeur in our surroundings. Indeed, you can catch a true picture of life only when you correct, refine, and extend your spiritual vision by the lense of beauty—by training your eye to see the eternally beautiful at the heart of things. John, banished to the barren isle of Patmos, might have been as disconsolate and heartbroken as Napoleon on St. Helena, yet he caught a magnificent vision even there of the Eternal Splendor.

A second lense we need is truth. I sometimes think that the surest indication of a man's greatness is his regard for truth and the amount of pains he is willing to take to arrive at it. Most of us, without realizinz we are wielding a thunderbolt, pick up and thoughtlessly pass on idle stories about our neighbors and our officials—town, state and national. These rumors weave finally such a net of misrepresentation about their subjects as to fasten upon many a worthy person an unsavory reputation, to thwart his usefulness, and even to bring about his death. If it becomes necessary to say something derogatory of another, let us say so only when we know that our words are true and when we have sound reason for every statement.

Families, classes, religious sects, and nations have also been so spun around with webs of half-truth as to become bugaboos to us—folks we can hardly treat fairly. And they in turn have retaliated by spinning webs of half-truths about us. The result of all idle tale-bearing, whether it be about a man, a class or a nation, is suspicion, friction, hatred—and—in extreme cases —war. We Americans are a particularly sentimental folk, easily swayed by emotion, easily led to like or dislike. Truth alone can free us from our unworthy loves and unreasoning hatreds, from blind prejudices and foolish superstitions. We need the lense of truth to help us see beneath superficialities and false appearances. We need the lense of truth to see our neighbor, freed from his possibly uncouth exterior and unfortunate manner, for the man he is with his heart of gold.

With our imperfect, partial vision we see the world of truth, like the world of beauty, only in vague glimpses. "For now we see in part." The world of appearances covers over its fellow of reality. It is only the patient truth-seeker, who may even sacrifice himself for his vision, who really sees. It has always been so. The ancients saw the world to be flat. Columbus, using the lense of truth to pierce externalities, perceived the world to be round. The politician and the war lord saw only a world where war must go on repeating itself. Woodrow Wilson, looking beneath the surface of things saw men's common interests and their sense of brotherhood to be more potent than their hates. It is only by the lense of truth that we can discern husk from kernel, the casket from the precious jewel within.

My third lense is righteousness. Behind the visible world stands the invisible moral universe. Carlyle likened the world we see to the clothes of the world we do not see. You and I, I suspect, at times assume that what is out of sight does not exist. Let us not fool ourselves. The invisible world has more reality than the visible. Your clothes wear out and disappear into the eternal rag-bag. Your house tumbles down so that in a few years men no longer know the place thereof. Human fortunes are dissipated like the morning mist. Islands disappear. The solid earth quakes destroying a hundred thousand people. Empires shoot up like sky-rockets only to disappear on the horizon of history. But the moral universe remains. The immutable laws of God abide through the ages.

All great seers have caught visions of the invisible moral universe. The hymn-writer perceived it when he wrote

"Suns and moons may perish;
Kingdoms rise and wane;
But the church of Jesus
Constant will remain."

The consciousness of it prompted Lowell to cry

"Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne;
Yet that scaffold sways the future
And behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadow
Keeping watch above His own."

Micah, from the midst of a wicked civilization, saw it and cried "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before thy God?" When the Roman emperors were lighting their garden parties by burning Christians and the kingdom of love that Jesus had promised seemed a hollow mockery, John the Revelator by this lense saw the invisible city of righteousness.

Short-sighted, squint-eyed folks lose sight of this moral universe. They try to "get by" with this or that. Perhaps they try to cut corners here and there. Possibly they indulge in somewhat shady practices thinking that they are all right since no one notices. They forget that "whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap"—one of the articles of the constitution of the moral universe. Rip Van Winkle blindly believed that he could indulge his appetite "just once more" and it would not count. He did not know that the moral universe, carrying out its relentless decrees in the laws of psychology, would grave the pathways of thought so deep in his brain that he never could escape the clutches of habit.

Is the world to you a place where anything is right that you can "get by" with? What seest thou?

To me religion is the power to see the three invisible worlds of beauty, truth, and goodness. Take from religion the power to see the universe of beauty and you make it fanatical and austere. Take from it the power to see truth and you make it a pious sentimentality, no more nourishing to working Christians than the east wind. Take from it the power to see righteousness, the moral universe, and you have a spineless and lazy religion.

Since men hunger equally for beauty, truth, and goodness there have arisen three great departments of human experience—which we ordinarily call art, science, and religion—to satisfy the hunger. These three lenses men use and need to see the completeness of life, to see God himself. Let me stress the word completeness, for limited and narrow and partial vision is the curse of our day. Every great seer sees life whole. Every great heart appreciates it whole. After all art, science, and religion are only three ways of looking at the one invisible universe of which the visible is, to use Bishop Cook's phrase, merely the scaffolding.

My friends of the senior class: you are now completing your college years. They have been a time of opportunity for you to sharpen, broaden, and in every way enrich your vision. I hope and believe the time has been well spent. We, your friends on the faculty, have tried to help you acquire the three lenses I have been talking about. We have tried to give you glimpses of the world of beauty revealed in literature, in the symmetry and order in the shapes, colors, and structure of the physical world, and in the hearts of great men and women. We want this world of indestructable beauty, which stands back of our immediate world of often ugly appearances, to play a vital part in your life. Likewise we want the invisible world of truth to mean everything to you. We have endeavored to show you the difference between truth and falsity and to demonstrate to you how truth may be reached. Our prayer has been and remains that you may be tireless seekers for truth, that you will not easily be misled by the sham, camouflage, or the superficialities of the world. We have tried to inculcate in you an appreciation of moral worth and of religion and to help you to catch glimpses of God himself.

Since what you see depends upon what you are—upon the richness of the storehouse of your soul—we have tried to fill your life with good things that you might indeed become seers. Since what you are and will be depends upon what you see, we have tried to give you an eagerness to correct, refine ,and extend your vision.

But in the world people are going to recognize you as college graduates. Your most intimate associates, your fellow citizens will, therefore, expect you to be different from those who have not been to college. They will expect you to see more. Realize, therefore, that as a corollary of your privilege in going to college you must accept the responsibility of augmented service. Remember nobless oblige—in plain English, privilege entails responsibility.

Some men see in the communities in which they live only a place to get all they can and can all they get. They see in them merely a trivial stage for petty actors to play their petty parts. Other men see in the community a challenge to service and the stage where the great drama of human history takes its significant course.

What seest thou?

Some men see the world only as a stupendous grab-bag, a place to enrich their pockets and to swell their importance. Other men see the world as a gymnasium for the development of moral and spiritual muscle, a battle field where a glorious struggle is being waged in which they are called upon to play a sacrificing and a significant part.

What seest thou?

Some men see in God a patriarchal personage who once created the world and now sits on a white throne watching it go with smug complacency. Other men see in God the source and sum of all power, the father of our spirits who is still pouring his creative energy into the world in abundant measure, who looks upon his children with compassion. Some men see in Him only the God of old women. Other men see in Him also the God of strong men, of men tute who delights in comforting, encouraging and developing all his creatures. Some men see in God the establisher of immutable inexorable law which he can not and will not use for the needs of his children. Other men see in God the master of the universe whose laws are his thoughts with which he serves even his humblest creatures. Some men see in God the creator of a world of dirt and crime and meanness. Other men see in Him the one who breathed the fragrance and the honeysuckle, who paints the colors of the sunset sky who created for his children after the likeness of his own pure and beautiful father-heart.

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