

P.S.

Burning efficiently

THE INTERNAL combustion engine, used the world over in cars, trucks and vans, is about fifteen per cent efficient. That means that some eighty-five per cent of the energy that is produced when we start our cars is wasted to vibration, moisture, emissions, noise and heat. Isn't it remarkable, even after all the advances of technology and almost 100 years of scientific research, that such inefficiency should lie at the heart of something so many of us use every day?

If we compare the human-designed engine to the human body, the contrast is stark. The more we know about the body's systems (the kidneys' filtration of our blood, for instance, the way the liver and intestines process our food and drink, or the way the human pain mechanism works) the more apparent it becomes how wonderfully designed we are. And it is *design*. It quickly becomes difficult to argue that the body's systems became so good by random mutation, but the combustion engine is so bad even though it was deliberately designed for a very specific purpose! If a human-designed engine can be only fifteen per cent efficient, it might suggest that the Designer of the human body has a rather greater talent.

Nevertheless, although we ourselves are well designed, this is not to say that there are no inefficiencies in our lives. There most certainly are. When I first heard about the rather dismal performance of the engine (from an auto industry executive, no less) it got me thinking about how much energy we waste in our own lives, energy and worry which is not directed to the main spiritual goals we would espouse. The answer is, Quite a lot. Indeed, we may not even be fifteen per cent efficient.

Now some of this is deliberate on God's part. He has required us to spend approximately one third of our lives in sleep. He has subjected human beings to a daily toil which to some extent is *pointless*; it is vanity and vexation of spirit. God has done this purposefully so that we might know our restrictions in His sight, and so that we might long for another existence that better fulfils our creaturely potential. God has also made us each individually go over much of the same ground in terms of knowledge, emotional and spiritual experience. We all start 'natural' and must try to grow 'spiritual'; we must each learn the same

wonderful truths about Him and harsh truths about ourselves. There are no free passes, no easy rides, and little sense that we begin where others left off (as opposed to beginning at the beginning). By definition this is inefficient as far as the sum total of spiritual knowledge, activity and insight might be concerned, but we might assume that it *is* efficient in terms of the individual spiritual path God wants us each to walk. He wants us to learn these things *for ourselves*, and sometimes He wants us to learn them the hard way.

But there are self-inflicted inefficiencies that we impose upon ourselves which hamper us when treading the spiritual pathway that God wants us to tread. If we must spend a third of our lives asleep and another third at work, and more time attending to our bodily needs and doing chores, then it makes the time that remains particularly critical. We can well do without wasting it with things that do not contribute towards (or even detract from) the spiritual project which is our life. Laziness is not something which jives well with efficiency, and it is not something which is singled out in the Scriptures as a virtue. It is useful periodically to look at our lives and ask what time-sinks there might be, habits and activities that lurk there and simply drain away time for perhaps only a modest amount of fleeting enjoyment, and to no real purpose.

Humans are good at generating efficiency where there is money to be made. Lean manufacturing techniques and time-and-motion studies are excellent at identifying even the tiniest wastage in a production process and eliminating it—with huge savings when the benefits are scaled up across a factory over time. If humans can make these kinds of analyses for filthy lucre's sake, what might we achieve in our own lives by looking at our own habits and time-sinks?

We began by talking about combustion, and the Scriptures use the metaphor of burning to positive and negative effect. It is of the Lord that human beings weary themselves as fuel for the fire; but it is also of the Lord that His people shine as bright lights in the world. This requires burning too, and if the supply of God's Word is there, and if our hearts burn within us as we read it, then the light will shine brightly and efficiently, as it should.

Mark Vincent