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Sermons for Special Sundays

John Agee Holt

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Sermons for Special Sundays



SERMONS FOR SPECIAL SUNDAYS

John A. Holt



Broadman Press

Nashville, Tennessee

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*To my Mother
who first introduced me
to our Saviour*

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Preface

The Sundays marking special days in the calendar come with opportunity but also with challenge to the minister. There is the opportunity of developing a theme which is already in the minds of the church attender because of the day or season. Then there is the challenge of saying something different or at least in a different way about a subject which may have received similar treatment in former years. The longer one preaches to the same congregation, the more difficult this challenge becomes.

These sermons were first preached to the congregation of which I am pastor, the Luther Rice Memorial Baptist Church of Silver Spring, Maryland. As there was no thought of publication at the time, I have doubtless used ideas from other men which I now find impossible to locate or to identify.

I wish to express appreciation to Mrs. John Black, who typed some of the initial drafts of the manuscript, and to Mrs. Garth Burleyson, who typed the finished copy of the manuscript for the printer. I am also grateful to a patient congregation whose inspiration and interest have made preaching a "labor of love."

JOHN A. HOLT



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1

Making the New Year Happy

(A Sermon for New Year's Sunday)

*If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them
(John 13:17).*

At this season of the year when we tell our friends that we wish for them a "happy new year," it might be well to stop for a moment and find out what we mean by "happiness." Few words are more difficult to define and few ideas would have larger interpretation and wider variety of meaning than the elusive goal of happiness.

Perhaps one reason we have not been successful in our quest for happiness becomes clear when we stop to realize that we are not really sure what we are after. Look at some everyday examples. Happy is the prize fighter who has just floored his opponent; the businessman who has just closed a large sale; the student who has passed a doubtful examination; the politician who has dealt his opponent a crushing defeat; the nation that has won the war; the child who has his toy; or the apostle who writes from his cold prison. Jesus spoke of his "joy" as he faced the cross.

These divergent views cover a wide scope in this matter of happiness; and what is joy supreme to one may be boredom personified for another. Therefore, the common phrase "happy new year" can be merely an appropriate phrase, de-

void of any real significance, or it can be something fraught with potential unlimited. The wish or prayer for a happy new year within the terms of the average reference of the Christian gospel is a thought that ought to make us pause. As a pastor thinks of the church family and prays that God will give each Christian happiness, there is the feeling that this is about the last thing that many of the members would really desire, for it would entail a drastic change in their whole outlook on life—not to mention their response to the visible kingdom of God, namely the church.

Strangely enough, Jesus had a good deal to say about happiness. The unrehearsed picture of the Master is one coincident with Isaiah's "man of sorrows," who was acquainted with grief (53:3). But underneath the crown of thorns and the shoulder that bore the cross is a man whose joy reached heights unparalleled by any before or since his time. Look at his life for a moment from that standpoint. Jesus was invited to a wedding feast in Cana of Galilee. They wanted him there. The people of his region who had known him all their lives liked the presence of the Master. I do not picture him on these occasions sitting in a corner giving a tirade against the evils of the day. He is welcomed by all who are there. Time and again, Jesus is presented in the Four Gospels as a much-sought-after dinner guest.

When Jesus began the great manifesto which we call the Sermon on the Mount, the first word to fall from his lips was "happy." How welcome to a people in the bondage of poverty, ignorance, and sin for a teacher to begin by talking about happiness. This is thoroughly consistent with the larger implications of the gospel, for does not gospel mean "good news," and would not that require that the bearer of it be happy?

On the solemn occasion of the Last Supper Jesus gave the

words of the text "Happy are you" and "My joy I give unto you." Not the tingling joy of surface mirth that gives an entertaining giggle at humor, but the deeper joy of the abiding satisfactions of life is meant. Therefore, if Jesus was concerned about his followers' being happy, and that follows from his own example and his own words in the New Testament, then we are on good ground when we express our own wish for a happy new year. God also wants the new year to be a happy one for us, and if we are willing to accept this happiness in the terms of reference that he has revealed, our wish has every possibility of coming true.

Now there must be in the minds of at least some the ready answer to our thought thus far. This is all well and good—we want to be happy, and maybe even God wants us to be happy. But let's be practical and realize that things have already happened in life that preclude real happiness in the coming new year. Here is a person who has lost a loved one in the family circle. Another faces serious illness. An employee does not like or respect his employer. A student who hates to study is forced to remain in school. A temptation that one is unable to overcome keeps returning. Happiness for these people hinges on changing the facts and things about them. This brings us to the conclusion that what we mean by happiness and what Jesus meant by happiness are not the same thing.

We cannot rearrange the world about us or change the facts that have already taken place! But we can change our attitude and outlook concerning these facts. Happiness does not consist in getting what we want—it consists in doing what God wants. Jesus inserted in our text both these elements of happiness—knowing God's will plus doing God's will equals happiness.

Far too many have never taken the time or the energy to

find out what God wants in their lives, and then when some faint glimmer of that revealed will presents itself, it is immediately shut out as being too difficult. We go down the weary, disappointing road of getting more "things" and laboring under the illusion that material things can produce spiritual happiness. Happiness is an attitude, an outlook, an adjustment, a reaction, a disposition of mind; all of which gives a satisfaction that abides and is pleasing to God. If God does not look favorably upon our happiness, then ultimately and surely we, too, shall be disappointed.

We have shared the dictionary definition of happiness, which is "good luck"—that over which we have no control. So we wait for the ship to come in that we never sent out in the first place; we depend upon some windfall of circumstance that brings momentary glee but in no way alters a disposition or attitude toward life. The reason so many are unhappy, no matter how much of the material world they possess and control, is because these material things only illustrate an outlook on life, they in no way change it.

Jesus never gave a finer illustration of the total consistency of his life than when he spoke the words of our text. From the human standpoint, he should have been anything but happy. Of this world's goods he had little, and shortly he was even to be deprived of human friendship and assistance. Still, he took this moment to mention his own happiness. The injustice of the trial was about to happen, the cruelty of the cross and the rejection by his own people came together, giving a combination of circumstances that would cause anyone to lose heart. But Jesus did not lose heart. His outlook on life was not determined by what happened *to* him but by what happened *within* him. This inner action could not be dictated by either Roman or Jew.

How needed is this insight and how practical is this lesson.

No one of us can control the outer circumstances of life, but we have a good bit of control over what these circumstances do to our attitude and outlook. We can become bitter and rebellious or we can try to make the most of what we have. Just as the two thieves on the cross represent the contrasting attitudes of rebellion and readjustment to an identical condition, we can determine what our reaction can be. This reaction becomes highly significant because our happiness, as God sees it, is determined in large measure at this juncture. Perhaps Jesus can help us in bringing about this adjustment between unalterable condition and the outlook that can be termed happy. Consider two things, both of which Jesus seemed to illustrate.

Consider in the first place that happiness does not come by itself. When a person says of his life, my goal is happiness, it would be difficult to say what that person will achieve. But we can be reasonably sure that the one thing he will not achieve is happiness. It would be like saying, I am going to be sad, irrespective of attitude or circumstance; or, I am going to be inspired today. We shall come much nearer being inspired if we concern ourselves with the conditions that bring inspiration.

Let's use the analogy of the train, familiar to all of us. As we go down the narrow track of life and telegraph ahead for happiness to meet us at a given point, we shall in all likelihood be disappointed. But it may be that in the journey of service to our fellow man we shall discover that happiness has gotten aboard at one of the way stations, and we will not have the faintest idea which one. Discovering happiness is like the proverbial old woman hunting for her spectacles—she finds them safe on her own nose, where they have been all the time.

The traditional New Year's Eve reveler is not going to find

happiness. Actually, what he is seeking is much nearer escape from reality. The very process of escape mechanisms, such as alcohol, is an admission that life as it really is is far from happy. But alas, the return journey from the unreal must be made and the would-be escapist finds himself again in the hard world of facts, reaping the results of his own sowing and enduring the consequences of his own wrong choices.

We simply do not find happiness by going after it. Never did the Master say to his followers, "Now the thing you want to seek above all else is your own happiness; seek ye first your own welfare and all will be well." The world gives us thousands of illustrations, most of them walking around, that this does not bring happiness. Even the rich, who have a sizeable portion of this world's goods and can buy whatever they want, give no illustration of being happy. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God." Thus, the will of God should be the supreme quest of life.

Again, to make the new year happy we ought to add something new. So often the only thing we change about the new year is the date on the calendar. For the most part, it is a repetition of the same old attitudes. Do we really have any good reason for believing that the coming twelve months will add anything in the way of virtue or eliminate anything in the way of fault? The inability to answer this question may give the key as to why the new year will be another dreary round of the familiar mistakes and another chapter of lost opportunities. An inscription on the tombstone of an Alpine Mountain guide contained these words: "He died climbing." This was surely a noble tribute; it is also a challenge for the living.

"Ye have not passed this way heretofore" (Josh. 3:4) has often been used to describe the "newness" of every new year, but it is more than that. The fact that the Israelites were

entering a new land and were about to undergo new experiences is not the real newness to which reference is made. On that basis this verse could be applied to any period in the history of Israel.

The picture here is of a strange army, a conquering host that was to penetrate the fierce Canaanite warrior and within seven years win mighty battles, destroy cities, and colonize a new territory. Doubtless the spies of the Canaanites, when they saw this approaching horde, were filled with wonder rather than fear, for it did not look like any army that they had ever seen. At the front was not the foot soldier with his spear, but a strange object, borne on the shoulders of men, clad not in armor but in the robes of the priest. This was the newness of the way in which they had not passed before. The pillar of fire and the cloud had been removed and now Israel was a people that would follow a book and take part in a covenant. This newness was deeper than the changing scene and the marking of a new time division; it involved a new relationship with God. How in keeping this is with the pattern of man's upward climb to a better relationship with his Maker. The prophets later came with a new vision; Jesus came with a new commandment and a new covenant; and John envisioned in his last insights a new heaven and a new earth.

Therefore, if the new year is to be a happy year, with happiness used in the sense of doing what God wants, most of us will need to add something to life a great deal more than we need to take something out. Whether it is the primary lesson of learning more of the Word of God, or whether it will consist of the Christian ideals of love and sacrifice, it is still in the addition of the new that our hope of happiness is to be found.

Now these are qualities that come in the terms of spiritual

achievements. The affirmation of this principle is especially necessary in a day when the material looms so large in our thinking. On the one hand we say that the spiritual is the primary consideration in living; but, on the other hand, we spend most of our time with the material. God is the primary factor in life but we are far more concerned over the latest development in the race for outer space than over the race that leads us into the presence of the living God. Even the church is prone from time to time to measure its stature by budgets and buildings and what has been called the "cult of religious activism." These things are to be added; they are not to be the objects of first concern.

Years ago in delivering the commencement address at McGill University in Montreal, Rudyard Kipling warned the students against an overconcern for money, position, and glory. Then he said, "Someday you will meet a man who cares for none of these things . . . and then you will know how poor you are."

Happiness, in the terms of which Jesus spoke, will come in direct proportion to the spiritual, not the material, assets that we possess. Insight into the nature of these spiritual assets is given in our text. They do not consist only in a knowledge of godly things; most of us have that—we know the vocabulary of Zion as it were, and we feel at home in the surroundings where Christian values are supreme. Happiness comes not only in knowing but in doing. Jesus did not achieve happiness by knowing God's will but rather when he performed it. In knowing and doing God's will one finds deep and abiding satisfaction. "If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them."

2

The Place of the Cross

(A Sermon for Good Friday)

When they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left (Luke 23:33).

For the most part, we have looked at the cross of Christ through the eyes of two questions: What does it mean? Why did it happen? Surely these are valid avenues of approach and even primary matters of concern in so vital a part of our Christianity. No stone should remain unturned and no road left untraveled which will shed light on the meaning and message of the cross. We should spare no avenue of investigation that will answer in part the question as to why Jesus was crucified, for in the answering of these questions we shall gain insights into our own religious responses that will be revealing beyond question.

Each of us stands at Calvary, just as did the groups in that first century. And it is even more tragic, for the general reaction of human rejection to divine mercy and love is unchanged, although we have had the advantage of knowing God's truth through his revealed Word. The Master could repeat the same seven words from the cross and they would be just as appropriate today.

Most of us do not feel quite up to grappling with ponder-

ous issues or engaging a theological lion in mortal combat. So, leaving the how and the why of the cross, let us visualize the place of the cross.

I am sure that all of us are sufficiently conversant with the endless procession of television mysteries to follow an analogy here. Time and again in the typical mystery the unthinkable astute detective, as he begins his investigation, will return to the scene of the crime. There, as he looks carefully at the place where it happened, the pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place. Now, this is not only good murder mystery procedure, but it is also an avenue into life. It is one thing to conceive of events that do not have around them the shell of circumstance; it is something quite different when they are set in the hard world of material reality and this reality forms the background in which the interpretation can be set.

Therefore, let us go outside that city wall around Jerusalem and sit for a moment, not to ask the theologian's why, but to look at the *place* of the cross. Every event and person and thing connected with the cross is fraught with significance. Even the stones on that hill would cry out a message if we could but hear them.

"And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left." We are first told that the name of the place of the cross was Calvary or Golgotha. Then we are told that it was between two thieves—in the midst of sinners. When the enemies of Jesus gave that sharp barb of comment, replete with sneer and slur, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them" (Luke 15:2), how amazed they would have been if the reply had been given, and it surely could have, not only does Jesus receive sinners and eat with them, but he seeks out sinners,

talks with sinners, lives with sinners, loves sinners, has come to save sinners, and his last breath, drawn in the task of redeeming sinners, will be in the midst of sinners. He did not hesitate to die *for* sinners, and he surely would not draw back from dying *with* them.

George MacLeod in his book *Only One Way Left* confronts us with this thought-provoking statement:

I simply argue that the cross must be raised again at the centre of the market place as well as on the steeple of the church. I am recovering the claim that Christ was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves . . . at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died. And that is what he died about.¹

The contrast between then and now is not hard to conceive as comparison is made between the place of the cross now and the place of the cross then. It began between two insurrectionists on a garbage heap outside the city amid the filth and vulgarity of crude and wicked men. Today it is seen in the pure sunshine atop a steeple or a spire; on a clean, quiet, protected altar between candles set in gold; resting on a velvet cloth; carved in stained glass windows; or dangling as a charm on a locket. Not that the cross and its meaning should not permeate all these areas, but the place of the cross and the place of the sinner must somehow come together, as pointedly and significantly as in the long ago.

All of this raises one of the most urgent problems confronting churches today; namely, how are we going to lift those whom we do not touch? The point here is not to cast the critical finger and say that we as church members are not in enough areas of life and the world. Our sin is the sin of scant measure; we have gone, but not far enough; we have

preached, but not nearly enough. Our sin is still going to be "inasmuch as ye *did it not*" (Matt. 25:45).

Do not think that all that is meant here is that the church and the cross must reach out into the squalor of the great cities, although much is involved here; but rather that the scattered fellowship of believers must between Sundays continue to proclaim their witness. When that is done, the cross will again be lifted to its original setting, where cynics scoff and sneer and men talk smut and people gamble with the sacred things of life. We must not equate the place of the cross with the place of a church building; they bear relation, but they are not synonymous. The place of the cross will be wherever Christians take cross-bearing seriously.

Not only was the place of the cross between two thieves, it was also at the crossroads. The Scripture reference indicates that the cross of Christ was at a cosmopolitan location. The word means "world city"—not localized, but at home in different cultures and where different languages are spoken.

When Pilate wrote his customary superscription to place over the head of his condemned criminal, it had to be written in three languages—Hebrew, Latin, and Greek—in order to be understood by the passing throngs. The Jew, the Roman, and the Greek; the religionist, the world citizen, and the scholar—how obvious is the suggestion that the cross must speak more than one language if it is to transmit its message to all of these. The cross is common ground. Think of the volumes of controversy that arise, not because men disagree basically, but merely because they do not speak the same language and their ideas are couched in different words with different concepts behind them.

Following a heated discussion, the observation was made that the pathetic part of the whole business was that the two opposing parties were not talking about the same thing. Their

trouble was not in what they believed, but in finding the language to accurately express what they believed. How long is it going to take us to learn that the gospel of Christ is bigger than the language of man and that the revelations of God cannot be contained in our little vehicles of language? It took three languages for the first cross; it will take many more today.

The cross of Christ was the place where God and man came together. God came down at Bethlehem in the Incarnation of his nature, but God and man came together at the cross in the reconciliation effected by Christ's death.

Had we been able to sit and watch the crucifixion of Jesus, doubtless we, like so many who saw the real scene, would have been confused and puzzled. No one ever received such treatment from his fellow man and evidenced such grace and forgiveness. Baffling, indeed, is the atoning death of Christ viewed from any standpoint. Even in this reaction of amazement and lack of understanding, the cross is prophetic of that which is to come in succeeding centuries, for the atonement is still confusing and defies all attempts at explanation.

Perhaps if we placed more focus upon what Jesus did at the cross, we might understand the whole process a little better. Here, where God and man came together, instead of reacting to the circumstances in which he found himself, Jesus acted. Rather than giving back in kind the treatment he was receiving, he set in motion his own response, based not upon what his enemies were doing to him, but upon the principles which he knew to be the only right basis for human conduct. Consequently, when they hurt him, there was no reason for him to hurt them. When they cursed him, he did not reply in kind but devised with his manner of death one of the abiding principles of his life—that a man is a creature made in the

image of God and has the supreme privilege of determining his own reactions, irrespective of how he, himself, is being treated.

What a difference this principle would make if incorporated into today's living. Someone glares at us and we glare back in return; someone says a cross word and we come back with a sharp barb of similiar intensity; we are cut out of our lane of traffic and at the next light we repay a like inconsideration; all of which is not only unchristian but also inhuman. As Christians, we should determine our own reactions, based on our own judgment, and not allow those whose ethics and values of life are totally different from ours to dictate our responses to various circumstances.

At the cross Jesus injects into the human scene an element that is worth remembering and repeating, for Jesus was never more Godlike than at Calvary. That element was that he broke the chain of man's evil designs and by reversing the flow of events was able to turn sin into righteousness. As man was doing his worst, God was at the same time doing his best, and by a miracle that surpasses all comprehension, he took that which should have condemned humanity forever and used it for his only means of salvation.

Look at a simple illustration of this process as it might be transferred into human affairs.² Although the temptation of Jesus in the face of man's cruelty was real and human, his reaction was anything but human. In everyday human affairs, we often see the same thing. The boss in the office is in a bad mood. During the course of the day emotional tension builds up until it finally spills over and one of his subordinates takes the full brunt of his wrath. This subordinate, in turn, vents his displeasure on his secretary, and she goes home and her unsuspecting husband or children receive adverse and uncalled-for reactions, who, in turn, may take

things out on their best friends or even the family dog.

But suppose one person in this chain of events decided to break the chain of reaction and act on his own initiative, irrespective of what he had received in the way of unfair treatment. Hence, instead of returning evil for evil, he would return good for evil. The chain would thereby be broken and the evil stopped. Is not this what Jesus was doing at the cross "when he was reviled, reviled not again" (1 Peter 2:23)? Were this principle of cross-bearing projected into our social contacts, the effect would exceed even our imagination. We desperately need those who will break sin's power, as Jesus did, returning good for evil.

The place of the cross in the day of Jesus and the place of the cross today are no different. Its healing balm must still touch the sinner's life; its message must still be couched in languages that can be understood; and it is ever the only place where God and man may come together that man might be forgiven and that God might still be holy.

3

Do You Want Eternal Life?

(A Sermon for Easter)

Then [came] unto him the Sadducees, which say there is no resurrection (Mark 12:18).

Easter morning has usually been considered a good time to delve into the matter of eternal life and immortality. Doubtless in many pulpits these subjects will be treated at considerable depth, not to mention length. I doubt seriously the value of such investigation for at least two reasons. For one thing, unless we are spiritually and religiously equipped to think in these realms, we may find ourselves in deep water and dealing with some very unfamiliar ideas. Immortality comes with a whole family of ideas and taken all by itself rarely makes any sense, but when we meet the parents and the brothers and sisters, we understand much better this member of the family. Eternal life is a *related* idea, surely not an *isolated* affair.

Another reason why a lecture on immortality and eternal life may be ill-advised is because we need first to ask not "What is eternal life?" but more pointedly and far more practical, "do you want eternal life?" The nature of eternal life can be completely academic if the answer to this second question is in the negative. I could be completely wrong, but I do not think the average man on the street in America

is losing any sleep over his concern for immortality and eternal life. People who are conscious of a coming judgment, of a responsible holy God, of a loving Saviour, of a revealed book called the Bible, of moral and spiritual values that go on forever, are the backbone of the churches, the hope of the world—the Christian minority that makes a difference. The average person is not included in this group. For even with Easter, when practically every church will have its best day, most people will not darken the doors of a sanctuary. Why go to great lengths in describing that in which so many are totally uninterested?

At this point, there is a strange contrast between “then” and “now,” between the pious Jew in the days of Jesus and the mature Christian in the twentieth century. The rich young ruler, Nicodemus, the sharp lawyer, and doubtless a host of others came to Jesus with the same question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” This is a strange question for the Hebrew of that day because in the Old Testament Scriptures there is so little real evidence in regard to immortality. It was indeed a *hope* in the first century. But make no mistake about it, if the hope of eternal life was yet to be developed, the *desire* for eternal life was much in evidence.

Today the situation has almost reversed itself. Surely with the New Testament background and the life of Jesus, the fact of eternal life and the hope of immortality take a mighty stride forward. There are a dozen chapters in the New Testament that prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that death is not the termination of a blind alley but rather the opening of a door into a new realm of existence. And yet, is the focus of our religion the hope of the pious Jew of Jesus’ day, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Not exactly. Even in some highly erudite Christian circles the focus on things to come receives a reaction of a dim view.

Where do we fit into this classification—those desiring and those not desiring immortality? Do you really want eternal life? There are several reasons why so many today evidence no interest in immortality. One reason is the reaction of the skeptic. People do not believe in a hereafter. The evidence is lacking for its support, they will say. And if by evidence they mean the results from an experiment, the testimony of a human witness, a mathematical formula—that sort of evidence, we all agree that such proof is not available. But in the realm of spiritual truth we cannot expect material evidence to be admissible; we must use spiritual evidence, an ingredient called faith. And we use it almost every time we turn around.

Look at some everyday examples. A young couple entering the venture of matrimony request proof that their marriage will work out to the happiness of both. There isn't any proof, nothing but faith. A tiny baby lies in its crib. The mother demands evidence that he will grow into useful manhood. There is no evidence—faith only. A church beginning some great venture for the glory of God demands evidence of success; there isn't any. In fact, there is no proof that the sun will rise tomorrow morning. It always has and we presume it will continue to do so. A thoroughgoing skeptic has a pretty dim view of life.

With all due respect to scientific inquiry, there are realms into which it cannot go and problems it cannot answer and needs it cannot fill. Consider this simple account of a realist about to go from one room to another; it isn't nearly as simple as you think:

I am standing on the threshold about to enter a room. It is a complicated business. In the first place I must shove against an atmosphere pressing with a force of fourteen pounds on every square inch of my body. I must make sure of landing on a plank traveling at twenty miles a second around the sun. I must do

this while hanging from a round planet, head outward into space, and with a wind of ether blowing at no one knows how many miles a second through every interstice of my body. The plank has no solidity of substance. To step on it is like stepping on a swarm of flies. Shall I not slip through? Verily it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a scientific man to pass through a door. And whether this door be a barn door or a church door, it would be wiser that he should consent to be an ordinary man and walk in rather than wait until all the difficulties involved in a scientific ingress are resolved.¹

Another reason why so many today are not interested in, or concerned with, eternal life is because there is nothing in their life worth keeping. It is not so much the improbability of eternal life that disturbs me. Faith will overcome this every time. But when there is no desire for eternal life, there is no remedy. When a man looks at his life and reaches the conclusion that there isn't a thing in it worth preserving, little wonder he is bored and despondent.

To put the same reason in other words, we cannot believe in or desire eternal life because we cannot bear the thought of anything in this life being continued forever in the next life. And yet, this is exactly what the Bible says is going to happen. Immortality is not only the beginning of some things which have never been but it is also the extension of some things which have already begun.

Is it not time that we begin to examine carefully this principle of extension to see where it is leading? Whether it ends with God or apart from God is a matter largely determined by our own decision. If I read the Bible at all correctly, I do not find any part of it that indicates that the fact of eternal life hinges on our own whims and fancies. Whether that eternal life is extended to God's presence or otherwise is very much there.

Still again, we do not want eternal life because we have looked on Easter as an anniversary when we ought to have looked on it as an affirmation. Easter is more than something that happened. More nearly it is something which began and is still going on. It is not something that you nod to once a year and say, "I still remember this piece of truth." Just as one robin does not make a spring, and one swallow a summer, one Sunday does not make an Easter.

In the life of Henry Irving,² written by his grandson, there is recounted an item of nineteenth-century theatrical history. Dramatic performances were to be presented only in certain theaters which had been granted a license. But this provision applied only to plays and did not apply to musical or operatic productions. So, in places where a license could not be obtained for putting on a play, someone would give a loud bang on the piano at the beginning of the play and that made it an opera!

Now, of course, one loud bang on the piano does not make an opera any more than one great surge of activity in April can make an Easter. On Easter morning we do more than celebrate the anniversary of a great event. We affirm our faith in a continuing power. We say that we believe in something that goes on right now. Because Christ arose, he lives; and this is the significant thing about Easter. Let me state the same truth in another way. So often we have thought of eternal life and immortality, and in thinking about these great items the key word is duration. The fact that it goes on without end is the part which captures our imagination. This is true; but the New Testament emphasizes the *quality* of eternal life rather than its *duration* or length.

At this point it is well to remember that Easter is different from all of the other special days which we celebrate. Christmas is the day when we mark the birth of an individual, a

point in history when God became flesh and "dwelt among us." Thanksgiving, although not strictly biblical, still is the memorial of our forefathers and their expressions of gratitude. Pentecost Sunday is the day to remember the time in Jerusalem when the early church received power for its task; it was the beginning of the age of the Spirit. Easter is also the anniversary of the resurrection of our Lord, but it is the time when we bear in mind the eternal aspect of our faith. The early Christians caught the idea when they changed their day of worship from the sabbath to the Lord's Day, or Sunday. Somehow for them Easter demanded a continual expression, and every time they came together it was a reminder that on the Lord's Day Christ arose.

Jesus is always our best argument, as well as our best evidence, of what Christian immortality is going to be like. In those times when he appeared to people after the first Easter, what was he like? One fact emerges, and that fact is that he was recognizable. There was a carry-over from his previous existence, some familiar features. Otherwise the disciples would not have known him. We have often tried to use this as argument for the carry-over and the persistence of personality, and I believe it has point; but it is also an argument that some things which we now possess we are going to possess still in the great beyond.

We are here today not only because Jesus was back there in Palestine nineteen hundred years ago, but also because he is here today. We want the kind of life that faith in the Son of God produces; it will begin in this life but it will find its completion in the life to come.

4

What Will You Give Your Children?

(A Sermon for Mother's Day)

Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matt. 18:6).

Our favorite picture of Jesus is one in which he is surrounded by children—"Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight." Children seem to sense immediately the innate kindness of Jesus and he in turn seems to sense their unmarred sincerity. But if the love of Jesus was great, his reaction to those who mistreated children was equally severe and strong. Woe unto the person who leads a child astray!

This stern rebuke of Jesus came because the disciples were having an argument. Inasmuch as Jesus had mentioned previously something about the church and the power of the believer, apparently they thought it was about time for the gradations of rank and authority to be drawn up. After all, a kingdom implied subjects and persons in authority, and so they pursued the point as to who would be the greatest. If they had tried, the disciples could not have gotten farther from the mind of the Master and the impact of his teaching.

The answer of Jesus to their problem was not a word but

an object lesson. He called a little child and set him in the midst of them. If you want the right kind of ascendancy and greatness, here it is—the humble and teachable spirit of a little child. Then Jesus uttered the words of the text in ominous warning: Imitate the child and you please God, offend the child and you offend God! Here is a type of sin to which many give little thought, the sin of causing others to sin.

This is a word, not only for parents, but for all who live where others can observe their lives, and it is impossible to live any other way. Not everyone has children, but everyone influences children. We are giving *something* to children. Might it not be well to stop and ask just what this something is. For example, we would not think of depriving a growing child of food for his body, of schooling for his mind, of the social graces for his personality; but what about the spirit around which all of life turns? Did you ever imagine what it would be like if some of our forefathers were miraculously transplanted into our twentieth-century civilization? How ill-equipped they would be for life as we know it! The rush-hour traffic would cause them to take to the hills; an airplane would be unexplainable; they could not tune a television set; and an automatic elevator would send them hunting for the nearest stairway (sometimes that is still the quickest way up).

Before we take pity on our great-grandfathers because they cannot push the right buttons of modern life, let us bear in mind that they may look at us in utter amazement that we have so little time for the abiding satisfactions of life. They might well accuse us of being "gorged with civilization and starving to death for culture." Henry David Thoreau, an American writer of over one hundred years ago, depicted accurately the impasse toward which America was heading

when he wrote the description of this nation in the following words: "Improved means to an unimproved end."

Can it be that we are giving our children civilization without culture? Professor MacIver, at one time professor at Columbia University, made a very careful distinction at this point: Civilization is made up of things we utilize to get something else; culture is made up of the values which we desire for our own sakes. Civilization is what we use; culture is what we are.¹ To illustrate this definition and distinction—the radio is a mark of civilization; how we use it is the mark of our culture. Do we broadcast for wide hearing that which lifts and benefits and entertains, or do we use it to give widespread hearing to nonsense? Television is a mark of civilization; what we permit to be shown on its screen is the mark of our culture. The automobile can carry a sick man to the hospital or it can speed a gangster from the scene of his crime. The printing press can dispense the knowledge of the life of Christ, or it can flood the newsstands with filth and vulgarity.

What are we giving our children? The passing on of civilization from one generation to the next is not difficult at all. Like a duck taking to water, growing children take to radios, stereo, automobiles, television sets, and automatic gadgets of all descriptions. In fact, it is much easier for a teenager to learn to use a new gadget than it is for grandfather to latch on to something new in the scientific world. But, what we are discovering is that while giving civilization to our children is relatively simple, giving them culture, especially spiritual culture, is a profoundly more difficult process. We can give young people a stereo merely by writing a check, but giving them an appreciation for good music cannot be done with a checkbook, no matter how large the bank balance may be. We can give them a Bible, but giving them

an appreciation for the Bible is so infinitely more difficult.

Strangely enough, the problem among the nations, the problem so often within the nation, and the problem in many a family is exactly the same—a cultural lag in the face of a rapidly advancing civilization! We have built a powerful bomb; now we must catch up with ourselves and control it. The bomb is civilization; the control is spiritual culture. We have given men the right to vote in our democratic civilization; now we need desperately to teach them to use the privilege rightly. The vote is civilization; its use is culture. Our families have houses in which to live; now we need to make some much needed advances in building homes. Houses are marks of civilization (much better than caves and trees); homes are the marks of culture. You can give a house; you cannot give a home.

Are we giving our children houses to live in or homes in which to live? A house is four walls and a roof and it is filled with the gadgets of the day; but a home is an atmosphere—a haven, a relationship where father and mother love each other, and where young lives can feel accepted as well as understood. A home is that place where a system of values is transmitted. Although we have made much progress in many realms and speeded many processes of life and work, we have not yet found any short cut for the transmission of spiritual culture from parent to child.

I remember while studying in the Louisville Seminary one of the professors told in class one day of his student days at Yale University. Many of his classmates were from wealthy homes and had been reared in the lap of luxury. The professor said he used to get a letter from home every few days all the time he was away, but some of the other students did not hear from their families one time. These young men were starved for affection; their fathers had given them everything

except themselves. Civilization? Great volumes of it. Culture? None. You can buy civilization; culture is not for sale. It must be taught to be transferred. Are we giving anything that falls outside the classification of that which can be purchased?

Homes or houses, that is the question. I do not have to labor the point that one of the darkest clouds on the American horizon is the breakdown of family life. And the reference here is not the high divorce rate, although this one factor alone is alarming in its own right. But the troubles and difficulties and maladjustments are not possessions of pagans and unbelievers. They cut across the lines of Christian families as well. A family can be together and yet be a long way from having any measure of happiness. Think of the parents who look upon their families in utter bewilderment because they have given them everything they need, and a lot of things they do not need; yet there is no happiness, no joy. Jesus said a long time ago, you can't buy happiness and hand it to somebody. The Bible puts it in these words, "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of things that he possesses." We are like a cartoon that appeared in *Punch* magazine. An indignant parent on an English holiday in an amusement park was holding his tired, whimpering offspring by the ear and angrily demanding, "Now then, are you going to enjoy yourself, or shall I make you?"

Are we giving our children freedom without discipline, power without control, life without religion? At this point we need to remember that the decision to worship is not one of the alternatives which a human being faces. We will worship something. Our only decision is to decide what it shall be. Therefore, we need to give to our children the raw material out of which this decision can be made.

One of the common misconceptions about the Christian

faith lies in the illusion that here is a religion that has in it no compulsions. Law has been cast off and you can do as you wish. Of course, this is not freedom in the Christian context at all. There is no sterner discipline known than that which is possessed by Christianity. Unlike the other disciplines in life, this one is imposed from within—not from without. Jesus said one must deny himself. No one else can perform this function. Admittedly, our churches do not appear as disciplined institutions; still, this is the impact of the teachings of Jesus.

The illustration of this need for discipline in order to have the right kind of freedom can be seen by observing a trend of our own times. One of the mottoes that we see on every hand is "buy now and pay later." Living on the instalment plan is practiced by vast throngs of people. What we need to remember is that in acquiring the Christian graces and in developing Christian character, it is not "buy now and pay later," it is "pay now and receive later." Stern old Savonarola, an Italian reformer of the fifteenth century, observed that the bad things in life the Christian pays for afterwards, the good things in life he pays for ahead of time. How right he was; sin demands its wages long after the wrong act has been committed. However, if we would have a virtuous life and the fruits of righteousness, we shall have to make careful plans. To gain the freedom of a disciplined life we must lay the groundwork ahead of time.² No one comes to a Gethsemane and prays the victorious prayer "not my will but thine be done" without careful planning and preparation.

One of the strange words of Jesus is appropriate here. "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Then he went on to say, as if to explain what he meant, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (8:36). What he is saying is that life has its

greatest blessing when we submit it to the right authority. Surely no one ever came to people with a sterner discipline than did Jesus; it involved cross-bearing and the total surrender of self-will. But in this surrender one finds life and liberty. A selfish person is a slave to his own desires; and this is a most miserable servitude.

Perhaps one reason why we have not passed on to our children this kind of self-discipline is because we do not possess it in very large measure. The watchword is self-expression and the surrender to all inhibitions. To observe the coming generation with a critical eye is not difficult to do. But before we affix all the blame on immaturity and youth, let us try to remember that in those who follow us and who have learned what they know from us, we may be seeing in accurate reflection our own shortcomings as teachers and leaders. Not only must we possess a spiritual culture that is worthy of imitation, but we must exercise the deliberate choice to effect the transfer.

One of the interesting things about the relationship of God to man is that in his revelation there is nothing that could be classified strictly as an item of civilization. God did not tell the Hebrews or anyone else how to make an internal combustion engine or how to harness electricity. He even let us discover the wheel and the other basic principles of machinery. But in the realms of culture and the Spirit, God had much to say. The things that we could not discover for ourselves he told us: which God to worship, what is right and what is wrong, and how to find forgiveness for transgression.

The conclusion is obvious—left alone, man will never come to these things, for he must be taught. Every generation starts from scratch. Tomorrow's newborn babe is at the same place morally and spiritually as was Abraham's son. Scientifically he is much farther along, beginning with the very

hospital where he enters the world. The “material” is almost automatic in its transfer from one generation to another; the spiritual must always be chosen. Will you give your children a spiritual culture? This is a heritage that will last forever.

5

Extraordinary

(A Sermon for Pentecost Sunday)

They were all amazed and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And they were all amazed, and were in doubt, saying one to another, What meaneth this? (Acts 2:7,12).

When the British novelist Arnold Bennett had finished correcting the proofs of one of his own novels, he wrote this comment: "I notice the far too frequent use of the word 'extraordinary.'" What Mr. Bennett said about the work of his own hands could be repeated about a thousand things in modern life. There is the far too frequent use of the word "extraordinary."

There are at least two extremes that we commit at this point. One is that of trying to build up the commonplace by giving it high-sounding descriptions, and laboring under the illusion that if the mediocre is called colossal often enough it will, by the very process of description, take on the qualities of "extraordinary." The silver screen has been using this kind of philosophy for a long time. Occasionally Hollywood supposedly produces the greatest picture of all time. Do the producers ever stop to realize that should they succeed in such a boast then forever after this dubious achievement they would labor in the shadow of an anticlimax.

The other extreme is just the opposite. Instead of calling everything extraordinary, nothing is extraordinary. "Enterprises of great pith and moment" not only lose the name of action, they fail to impress us at all—like the American tourist who came down from a tour of the Swiss Alps with the pathetic comment, "Nothing but scenery up there." Like Jacob of old, we stand in the presence of God "and know it not." The backward glance of many a life will reveal the sad confession that most of us have let the great opportunities of life slip through our fingers. To be sure, it is bad when everything is great but is it not worse when nothing is great—nothing extraordinary? In our twentieth-century sophistication we are unimpressed, and lest we confess that there is something that we have never heard of, we fain a knowledge we do not possess and a familiarity that was never ours.

This business of being unimpressed and assigning nothing to the realm of the extraordinary is a consistent expression of the age in which we live. Is not this a natural outcome of a people who more and more do not want to become involved in the more responsible aspects of human life? We have not allowed ourselves to get close enough to either people or things to see them in any other light than that of "the common day." To say the word "extraordinary" is to commit yourself. And this seems to be one of the things that modern man is not supposed to do—don't commit yourself, don't get involved, don't take any risks. Why participate when you can watch from a safe distance?

This is one of the things that Jesus had in mind when he said, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). One of the aspects of children is they can be impressed with greatness; they have the capacity for amazement. May we never lose the capacity, especially in our religion.

I can think of few Sundays in the church year when the word "extraordinary" could be used more appropriately than this day of Pentecost. For this is the anniversary of the birthday of the church, the memorial of that day when the Holy Spirit set in motion the organized forces of religion. Today is "Founder's Day." And it all began with tremendous excitement.

How many times in the dignified King James translation an exclamation would have been the only appropriate punctuation. Twice Luke described the multitude as "being all amazed." He described them again as being confounded and another time as marveling at the events. All this in the short space of twelve verses (Acts 2:1-12). The fitting climax to it all comes in the answer given by the cynics of the day: "These men are intoxicated" (2:13). It was a high compliment that their enthusiasm had reached such visible expression. Hence, the message is that we must never lose the conviction that Christians possess an extraordinary religion, and that not very many things will put out the fires of enthusiasm more quickly than for our faith to slip into the rut of routine. Wordsworth described this process in a single line:

And fade into the light of common day.

The question is appropriate: What is extraordinary on this Pentecost Sunday?

In the first place, let it be said that we have an extraordinary gospel. The adjective preceding the word "gospel" is used with the full understanding that the average man giving his unrehearsed definition of it would not begin by saying it is "extraordinary." In fact, he might say just the opposite. A church service is certainly no longer characterized by excitement. What Charles Spurgeon said about

one of his contemporaries might still be applicable—that a certain preacher whom he knew would make a good martyr; he was so dry he would surely burn well.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the world looks on the gospel of Christ as anything but extraordinary. The fault lies not in the gospel but with those who transmit it. On the day of Pentecost the disciples were bubbling over with excitement. They began the proclamation of the gospel by retaining its original meaning—"good news." The preacher needs to remember this every time he mounts his pulpit. He ought to be able to preface every sermon with the words, "I have good news for you." To be sure, the sins of humanity need to be pointed out that they might be overcome, but the message must never end with the condemnation of the guilty; it must give the remedy. That remedy is the gospel of Christ.

When we stop to think about it, the gospel of Christ is not only extraordinary; it is breath-taking. The fact that the cross of Christ could become the means of man's redemption instead of the irrefutable evidence for his condemnation exceeds our imagination and should cause us to stop in sheer amazement. The English poet W. H. Davies, in his autobiography, set down this capacity for amazement as one of the real measures of life. "Let us not judge life by the number of its breaths taken, but by the number of times the breath is held, or lost, either under a deep emotion, caused by love, or when we stand before an object of interest and beauty." The poet is right. We have measured life by the regularity of breathing and assumed that if respiration were proper, life was unmistakably present. According to this view, most of us are giving the best indication of being alive about two or three o'clock in the morning, and our breathing may not only be regular but even audible. In this condition of un-

consciousness we are far from being really alive. We are more nearly alive when we catch our breath because of excitement and wonderment.

God's grace, as expressed in Christ Jesus, is always out of the ordinary, for the ordinary thing is not grace—it is justice. Gerald Kennedy¹ tells of an experience in his youth when money was hard to come by and he was delivering papers to increase his earnings. He had to get up at 3:30 A.M., and on one particularly cold, rainy morning the task was anything but easy. After the bicycle ride down to the pressroom, and still feeling the effects of the cold rain through which he had ridden, he carefully folded his papers in the warmth of the building. When he finally mustered courage to go out in the cold and rain again, he saw the familiar object of his father's car waiting for him. "Son, it is too cold for you to ride your bicycle on the route this morning . . . put it over there in the corner and I will drive you." This is grace in understandably human terms, and what makes it so extraordinary is that the father by no standard of justice had to appear on that cold morning. He was there because of his concern and interest. Here is the quiet but powerful wonderment of God's grace. He was there when he did not have to be there. Nothing ordinary about this!

Again, let it be noted that the early church began on an extraordinary basis. J. B. Phillips' preface to his translation of the Acts of the Apostles, *The Young Church in Action*,² states that there are two types of people who should study carefully the early church in the New Testament. First, those people who consider that Christianity was founded upon a myth and is today a spent force. The fact is that the writer Luke describes the beginning of the practice of those virtues which the humanist and the unbeliever so frequently assume to be natural to all human beings everywhere, despite the

evidence of two world wars and the observable results of atheistic communism. When people are left to their own devices they do not mature into lovely, unselfish, delightful people; they are just the opposite. I do not know of any youngsters whose parents have to teach them to be selfish, but I know of a good many who are going through a battle royal trying to instil one ounce of unselfishness into their offspring.

The second group that needs to read the Pentecost story is that composed of church people. One of the curious phenomena of modern times is that it is considered perfectly respectable to be abysmally ignorant of the Christian faith. We are ashamed not to read the newspaper or the latest book, or admit that we have never seen a well-known television program; but regarding the Bible we say unashamedly, as if almost proud of the fact, we don't know very much about it.

Many a Junior boy can now give a pretty good recitation on the solar system and describe a space rocket with unbelievable accuracy. But when it comes to knowing some of the events that have made possible this kind of scientific progress, this education that nurtures free inquiry, it is a different story. Men have not come to the New Testament, examined it carefully, and reached the conclusion that it does not merit serious attention. The fact is they have not examined it at all. We have a passing familiarity with the biblical narrative, but it is on the surface only.

What did the eleven apostles have in the way of equipment when they stood gazing up into the heavens as Jesus' physical body ascended into heaven? Nothing that could be measured, weighed, or counted. The vested interests of Roman Law, Greek philosophy, and Hebrew ritual were formidable obstacles indeed. The secret of their power is revealed in Acts 2:1-12. Theirs was a power which toppled

kings from their thrones and struck fear into the heart of a pagan Caesar. The Holy Spirit became their companion! Extraordinary, you say; highly irregular indeed, unthinkable to the last degree. The church then must never be poured into the mold of ordinary standards and measured by mundane yardsticks. The best methods of business will not build a church, they will build a business. The power of the Spirit will not submit to analysis. I feel sure that a survey analysis of the early church would have revealed glaring omissions. All they had was the power of God, but that was enough. Extraordinary!

Indeed the gospel is an extraordinary power and the early church of the apostles did begin in an extraordinary manner; but that is all in the past, it makes interesting history. What about today? Is there anything extraordinary about Christianity and the church now? A good question for any religion.

Christianity has been criticized severely at this point. Our critics say that we look *back* to a glorious time—the age of miracles, the time when God spoke in thunder and lightning and through gleaming white angels; when he parted the Red Sea; scorched the peaks of Carmel; destroyed the Assyrian armies; rolled away the great stone from the tomb of Jesus; turned the world upside down with the apostolic preaching. Or, they say, if we do not do that, we look *forward* to streets paved with gold, to the reign of righteousness, when nation shall not rise up against nation.

Here is the question of the practical, if not skeptical, man who looks seriously at the Christian faith: Is there any significant word today, now? Is there anything extraordinary about the Christian faith today? We shall have to admit that the average church is about the last thing in society that would be accused of having power greater than the scientist;

of having answers superior to those of the conference tables. If we but had the eyes to see it, the words of Jesus are coming true all about us, "greater works than these shall [ye] do; because I go unto my Father" (John 14:12). Jesus' first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee, is today, not off in the future nor back in the dust of history, surpassed by the constant miracle of turning a cannibal into a man; of turning a creature who hates into a creature who loves; of turning a selfish pagan into an unselfish Christian. Jesus can turn the ordinary rut of the routine into an extraordinary experience.

What I am saying certainly includes the fact that the extraordinary gospel of the New Testament is first the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth. A life can be transformed from one that is in rebellion against the will of God to one that is in harmony with the will of God. But it also includes the assurance that God does not leave us after we are converted. If we will seek his presence and his wisdom, he will guide us and live with us day by day. To the factual, realistic mind of the world this is not only extraordinary but preposterous and unthinkable that God would have a plan for individual lives and for individual churches. Those of us who have been Christians through the years know better. I believe that God will guide us day by day, and just as he sent the manna in the wilderness, so will he send us the Bread of life and the Water of life.

Pentecost records the entry of the Holy Spirit into human affairs. I do not find a single shred of evidence that indicates that this same Spirit has ever departed from human affairs; in other words, he is still with us, he is still here.

We have made much of the symbolism present at Pentecost—the tongue of flame indicating that the ministry of proclamation, of talking about Jesus, was to be a primary one.

Also involved is the fact that the entry of the Spirit came in the form of fire—fire that consumes, that purifies, that possesses tremendous power. This is the kind of activity in which the church is to be engaged. In David Loth's *Lorenzo the Magnificent* the story is told about Lorenzo de' Medici, the Italian pageant director, who on one occasion furnished the citizens of Florence a little more pageantry than he had planned. In one of his religious presentations he was staging the coming of the Spirit of Pentecost and he used real fire to show the descent of the Spirit on the apostles' heads. The flimsy trimmings and stage hangings went up in a blaze and not only the stage but the entire church was burned to the ground. The story sets our imagination running in many directions, but let us stay with the truth of Pentecost; Christianity is an extraordinary religion. May we never remove this word from our spiritual vocabulary.

6

A Son's Prayer to His Father

(A Sermon for Father's Day)

The younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living (Luke 15:12).

The parable of the prodigal son has long been considered our best picture of the Heavenly Father. As the father scanned the horizon for the return of his erring son, his compassionate love was clearly seen. Not only does God love the world generally, he loves people in particular. However, if this story is an accurate picture of God, it is an equally accurate picture of man. Another phrasing for these thoughts could well have been "an ideal father and a typical son."

That the insights into the relationship between God and man are drawn in the context of the family circle is not surprising. Here is society's primary institution. Even the church with all its divine mission and spiritual power cannot duplicate or take the place of the home. The opinion is held by many that the church can determine the home, but in reality the opposite is true—the church is determined by the home. If there is a breakdown in the family relationship, there will be a corresponding breakdown in the church. This parable pinpoints the family relationship even to a smaller circle, the relationship of fathers with sons. One of the dark clouds on

the horizon of our nation as a whole is certainly in this area.

Note further that the insight into this father-son relationship is seen through the window of prayer. In fact, the whole parable swings on the two hinges of prayer. The first prayer is that of "Father, give." Most of our own prayer life begins at this point; the regrettable fact is that many never go beyond the place of asking God for material things. They think of God as a "Santa Claus" who supplies their wishes and meets their demands as they arise. The second prayer is far more noble: "Father, make me as one of thy hired servants." Not very many are willing to pray this prayer, for it requires deep humility. The great gulf between the two prayers of the prodigal is wide and deep.

It is interesting to note that the father in the parable chose to answer both of these prayers. First, the son wanted what he had the right to receive, he desired to get what was coming to him, and that is exactly what he did receive. The picture of the prodigal munching on the hard husks is the picture of man's getting what he has the right to receive. If God does not intervene in the human drama, if he allows things to work themselves out through cause and effect, according to what is just and right, this is what happens. It is only when God answers the prayer of a man who asks for that which he has no right to receive that sonship and restoration can be achieved. The young son, after his bitter experience, knew that he was not worthy to be a servant in his father's house, and so he rested his case on the mercy and love of his father. The appeal to justice is always disappointing; the appeal to mercy is always rewarding.

Inasmuch as this first prayer is more nearly the picture of life, let us try to see exactly where we can fit into this parable. Look carefully at the text: "Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." Give to me the things that I have a right to

receive. "And he divided unto them his living." Here is a verse where a young man can see himself as he really is and a father can see himself as he ought to be. Three questions seem to call for an answer.

What does this young man really want?—On the surface, it looks simple enough—he wants the part of his father's money that is rightfully his by virtue of being his father's son, and he would like to have it now so he can use it. Is that all he wants? Is it that simple? Do you always know what you want? Most of us can look back over our own experiences of fulfilled desire and remember how badly we wanted something, only to be disillusioned because we did not really want it after all.

Several years ago you may have read the widely sold book, *Hidden Persuaders*, by Vance Packard.¹ It was a careful analysis of the advertising world, presenting the various products and the means of getting people to buy them. One of the major premises of the book was that it does no good to ask the average housewife what she wants in the way of consumer goods. So they set about to find out what she really wants, and discovered that they had no trouble whatever selling anything from a can opener to a cake mix. I had to agree in a lot of respects, for one of the hardest things in the world to discover is what a congregation really wants.

What was lurking behind this first prayer, "Give me what is coming to me"? In plain English, here is a young man who wants to get away from home. Are there sons today who possess the same desire and live for the day when they can leave the home place, be on their own, and pursue their own desires without interference and restraint? I am told that even a daughter here and there gets hold of the same thirst for escape, and somehow nothing will do but that they pull up stakes and strike out on their own.

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In fairness, let it be said that it can be a completely unholy desire, or it can be the finest thing that ever happened to a young man or a young woman. The motive behind the escape is the key. If it is to do things that you cannot do at home, then the grief of the prodigal will be the inevitable result. If it is to assert a rightful independence of personality and decision which ought to come with adult life—the satisfaction of knowing that you can really support yourself and make your contribution to society—then it will be a blessing for all concerned. It is the former that is true of the young son. Lurking in his mind is the insatiable desire to show the world what he can do.

Observe carefully this younger son, for his number is legion. What he earnestly desired is not really so terrible. To break the home ties, to make his own decisions, to enjoy the independence and the freedom that God intends for man to have—these things are surely not bad in themselves. In fact, we would look on this typical son with a great deal more disapproval had he never wanted to do anything for himself, and had he been content to allow another to make all his decisions. His error came in the means by which he was going to achieve what could be a very commendable goal. His illusion was that one could purchase freedom, friends, and community position. It would not be hard for us to imagine his father's thinking, as he divided out his substance to the young man, for he knew that he was not going to be able to get what he really wanted with this portion of the inheritance.

When Mark Hopkins was president of Williams College in Massachusetts, it was discovered that one of the students had defaced the walls in one of the buildings. When the offender was finally caught, he was discovered to be a son of one of the wealthy families of the area. As the young man

came into President Hopkins' office, he jauntily pulled out his checkbook and said, "Well, doctor, what is the damage?" Mark Hopkins replied, "Put up your pocketbook. Tomorrow at prayers you will make public acknowledgment of your offense or you will be expelled." Speaking later of the incident, the great educator said: "Rich young men come here and take that tone as if they could pay for what they get here. No student can pay for what he gets in Williams College. Can any student pay for the sacrifices of Colonel Williams and our other benefactors, for the heroic sacrifices of half-paid professors who have given their lives that young men might have, at smaller cost, a liberal education? Every man here is a charity student." 2

Why did the father give his sons their inheritance?—This is the second question that this son's prayer to his father suggests. The young son, asking for his father's substance, wanted that which money cannot buy, only he did not know it yet. But the father knew it and now the problem was how the lesson could be taught?

According to Jewish Law (Deut. 21:17), at the death of the father the first-born would receive two thirds of the inheritance and the younger one third. The father did not have to pass on the inheritance to his sons, but he chose to do so. Did you ever notice how many times in the biblical record God gave people what they requested? When Samuel passed off the scene the Jews asked for a king; and, against the advice of God, they got their king. So often the only way we learn the lesson God wants us to learn is to let our unholy desires run their natural course. Be careful how you pray—God may give you the very thing for which you ask and, as in the case of the young son, it may bring waste and want and humiliation.

But why did the father allow his young son to have that

which would bring waste, want, and humiliation? Augustine, the theologian of so many centuries ago, suggested that "it is not by our feet but by our affections that we either leave [God] or return to [him]." Why did the father give his son the material substance that would sustain him for a season away from home? It was because the son had, in reality, already left home. As long as this young man was at home wishing he were away from home, he had already begun his journey of sin and tragedy. And what was true of the younger son was also true of the older son; hence, "he divided unto *them* his living."

How consistent this is with the picture of the typical son and the ideal father. The father did not have to part with his substance and hand it over to his sons; he chose to because apparently this was the only road to develop any moral excellence or virtue in these two sons. He recognized the fact that the break between him and his children had already taken place, and the only question now was how to get them back. Sin had separated, and the question now was not primarily chastisement but redemption, restoration.

I suppose the thrust of this parable about the father and his sons, if it says anything to us, would teach that both sons were in the far country—one geographically and physically; the other at home all the time, working in the fields, eating at the table, living in the same house, but by no stretch of the imagination is there a kindred spirit with his father. How tragically true this is of so many families; they are together, but in reality they are miles apart. There is no sharing of experiences, no common joy, no bond of fellowship.

One of the sons never saw the light. But the other one did. Sitting in a hogpen with a husk in his fist, he looked at himself. Then he said the magic words "I have sinned"—words that have never yet failed to touch the heart of God and

pave the way for glorious redemption. In effect he said, "I shall go back to my father, not on the merit of what I have done, for in reality I have nothing of which to boast. I shall go back and trust wholly the mercy of my father." We can live very close to the physical things of our Heavenly Father and still be a long way from his heart. We can know his Book, operate his church, be conversant with holy things; when we are home, we must be *at* home.

This story ends on a joyful note—a banquet, a feast, a homecoming. It ends with a song.

What did the father really give to his sons?—The answer is in the text, "And he divided unto them his living." There is the indication that this father had divided unto his children something more than the physical necessities of life. He had given to them his life, his living, himself! Consequently, when the young lad was in the far country he had something to draw upon other than the silver and the gold he had received from his father, for in reality he had received a great deal more than that. He had received that which a son has a right to receive from a parent. There is a double meaning in that initial request, "Give me the portion of goods that falleth to me."

On this Father's Day the text poses a crucial question. Have you who are fathers given to your sons that which, by all standards of right and justice, a son has the expectation to receive? In the parable the ideal father surely had done that. To the comfort of all who are fathers, note that even with all this the young man still learned his lesson the hard way, and when the story ended the elder brother had yet to learn his.

A son has the right to expect a great deal more than food, shelter, and clothing. In our land of prosperity and the growing middle class these assets have usually been achieved.

This younger prodigal had gotten some other things of which he was unaware at the time, but nevertheless had worked their way into his personality and sense of values. His former training asserted itself, else he never would have had the vision to see himself as he was in the pigsty. Deep in the mind of this profligate young man, in the depths of his misery, was the subconscious realization now coming to the surface that his father loved him, that the values and ideas of his father were real, and in his condition of waste and want he saw the shallowness of his own extravagance. The early training broke through.

The Bible says that if we train up a child in the way that he should go, when he is old he will not depart from it. This does not mean that there will be no difficulties and pitfalls between the time he grows to adulthood and the time he is mature in his thinking. Sometimes that can be quite a long time. Today as I read books and articles dealing with family problems, it is interesting to note that the authorities are saying that what is needed in the father-son relationship is love, understanding, and acceptance. Are not these qualities crystal clear in this parable?

William James, the great American philosopher, has said, "The great use of life is to spend it for something that outlasts it." How much are fathers today giving to their sons that will outlast themselves? Integrity, Christian example, self-discipline, and kindness—these go on forever.

Sometime ago an executive for the National Association of Home Builders declared that sixteen million homes in America are below standard. I suppose what he meant was that sixteen million houses in our land are substandard. But his observation carries seed for thought. Perhaps there are a lot of houses that have all the modern equipment from dishwasher to built-in stereo, but are homes where a son never

hears father pray, homes where the church is never mentioned except in criticism, homes that would be embarrassed if Jesus suddenly appeared.

Sons are still coming to their fathers with the ancient request voiced in our text. In a day when we give them so much materially and scientifically, may we also give them some things that are eternal.

7

Hours or Centuries?

(A Sermon for Independence Day)

A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night (Psalm 90:4).

On the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, it is well to give just recognition to the men in whose debt each of us now stands. The more we know about the founding fathers of this nation, the more amazed and impressed we are by the long look that characterized their deeds. In the back of their thinking there seemed to be the guiding idea: How can we keep the liberty which we have just achieved? It was a natural concern for men who could still hear the cannon shots of the Revolutionary War and feel the cold of Valley Forge. They believed that God intended for men to be free. We still believe that, and today a vigorous struggle is underway to try to maintain this concept of a free government, with a free church, conducted by men who are free.

The question that presents itself on this day is not only can we match the discipline and industry and intellectual grasp of our forefathers (and I seriously doubt that we can); not only are we willing to match their sacrifice in order to maintain the precious liberties which they have made possible; but in some small way can we have it said of us, as could be

said of them, "They took the long view and planned not only for their generation but for all generations to come"?

One gets the feeling that our philosophy of life can be summed up in that pagan phrase, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die." So long as the things we want will last as long as we think we will last, that is all that matters. Let it be said forcefully that the American nation was not built on this outlook, the Bible was not created with this philosophy, and no man who is an earnest Christian can be the victim of this brand of shortsightedness.

One of the gentle but firm rebukes that Jesus gave was right at this point. "Lord, are we ready now to restore Israel? After three and a half long years is it not time?" To which Jesus said, "No, not now. Not after three and a half years, or three hundred years, or, perhaps three millenniums will the kingdom be restored" (cf. Acts 1:6). The Master had the religion of the long look. He was laying the groundwork for the structure of the kingdom of God, a structure that would not be built in a day but would be eternal.

All down the road of spiritual progress the men who mattered took a long look. Moses trudged out his monotonous forty years, wandering in the dust and sand, that a new generation might arise worthy of the trust of a new covenant and concerned with something more than their own survival. The New Testament writers composed a literature that those who followed might be able to listen and read from those who knew Jesus in the flesh. It was the long look on which the kingdom of God was built and the truth has not changed. Our founding fathers took that long look and out of it we have forged a nation with tremendous potential. Is it not time that we fill the niche of our destiny and look beyond the passing moment? There are real values here. Look at some of them.

This kind of outlook will save us from a preoccupation with the present. Perhaps I ought to say an "undue preoccupation" with the present moment, for it is in the present that we live and move and have our being. Nobody ever did anything yesterday because it is gone and tomorrow has not come. Now is the time for action.

Some years ago at Princeton University it was announced that a very unusual clock had been restored, a clock which had been found back in 1771.¹ This clock showed the motions of the heavenly bodies according to the system of Newton. On the face of the clock the time was not only indicated by the hour of the day but there was a hand that indicated the century. I've heard of clocks that told you the day of the week and the month, but one that reminds you of the century, this is new. The idea is a good one. Telling time by centuries. Many a man, many an institution, many an idea has forgotten what century it is. In some quarters some things are still in vogue that in others went by the board a century ago. It is so easy to forget which century we live in. God's wrist watch, I believe, points to the centuries, for his plans are not short-termed affairs—they take millenniums. "A thousand years in his sight are but as yesterday when it is past."

We stumble on something here that is not only vital but quite practical. If we can escape this undue preoccupation with the present, we shall also escape the discouragement that magnifies every failure because we are so close to it. It was Ralph Waldo Emerson who said that "the lesson of life is . . . to believe what the years and the centuries say, against the hours." Men who have been able to take this view of life have been worth a great deal to their fellow man. During one of the darker moments of the Revolutionary War, George Washington wrote from his headquarters, "If I were

to wish the bitterest curse to an enemy on this side of the grave, I should put him in my stead with my feelings." This is worse than discouragement, this is hopelessness, and today we are profoundly grateful that the outlook of the hour did not become the outlook of the century.

"Under the head of Juvenile Delinquencies we see the lamentable extent of dishonesty, fraud, and other wickedness among boys and even young children . . . many of them belong to organized gangs . . . and half of the persons convicted of crimes have not attained the age of discretion." Did this come from last night's newspaper? It sounds as though it might have but it was written in 1829! ² Now, of course, no problem was ever solved by the knowledge that somebody else has also had it; but there is consolation to know somebody else did not stop dead in his tracks because of it. Whenever we have the vision to put ourselves in the proper perspective and see things as they are, not as they appear to be, we are on the right track.

Consider again that this outlook which makes centuries more important than hours is not only preventive, it is also creative. On the positive side it will cause us to engage in better planning. The story goes that the mighty ocean liner *Queen Mary*, was ploughing through the Atlantic. One of the passengers inquired of the captain as to the length of time it would take the ship to stop if it were going at cruising speed. "At least a mile," replied the captain, "and further than that to come to a full stop." And then he said something worth remembering. "With a ship like this, you have to think *a mile ahead*." How accurate is this analogy to life in general, for when the weight of a whole life is set full speed in one direction it cannot be stopped in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye. You have to think a mile ahead and take the long look.

The application here could be made in many areas.³ Our nation itself as it observes the anniversary of independence stops at a real point of need as we ask, if we maintain our present momentum in the direction of social planning, in church-state interrelation, in moral fiber, how do we come out a mile ahead? Like the large ocean liner, the course of our nation cannot be stopped in a second. Is this course toward or away from Christianity?

An interesting case came before a New York court in the year 1932. On the death of the Shah of Persia, one of the largest banks in New York City was appointed executor of his estate in the United States. Objection was raised in Persia that the New York bank was not qualified to administer the estate since the Shah was a Mohammedan and the bank was a "Christian institution." So, the bank was forced to go solemnly to court and procure legal proof that it was not a Christian institution. Needless to say, it made its case easily and completely. There are a great many institutions which could easily prove their non-Christian character.⁴

Churches need to exercise the same kind of projected vision. In a day when the missionary enterprise scarcely keeps pace with the population expansion; when programming and organizational machinery become more and more the primary consumer of time; when the standards of success used to measure business are increasingly applied to the kingdom of God, we should think a few miles ahead. If the present trend continues, will ours be the kind of church that Jesus wants?

Still again, the vision that looks at centuries instead of hours will produce a third value. Not only are we saved from the pitfall of preoccupation with momentary discouragement, not only can we plan more effectively, but we can also

make the right use of the present moment. Our forefathers in writing the historic documents on which our nation has rested for these many years not only passed on to us a blessing, they also strengthened the day in which they lived by saying a vital word for their century. The cause of human liberty and the rights of an individual form a good word that one can say to his contemporaries.

There is an unusually pertinent word here for Christian people as we seek to speak not only for all time to come but for the day in which we live. As we seek to relate the teachings of Christ to the present age, we are accused frequently of having a tremendous word for the next life but not much for this life. It all seems to be "pie in the sky by and by." As one of the characters in *Alice in Wonderland* states it so pointedly, "jam tomorrow and jam yesterday—but never jam today."

The long view that plans for the future invariably speaks the best word for today. The reason is that things like freedom, human dignity, the moral law of God, and the recognition of the rights of others are eternal values. This was true centuries ago, and will be true forever. The hours may have their peculiar needs and problems but it is the centuries that will determine a nation's destiny.

In preparing this message, I have tried to put myself in the position of the founding fathers and to capture something of the outlook that they must have possessed. In many ways this cannot be done because life is so different now and we know so much that they had no way of knowing. However, there is one phase of this outlook that imagination can accurately portray. In those days there was no illusion cherished as to the substantial nature of the American republic. It was on trial for its life. After nearly two centuries of successful national life and the ascendancy to a top world

power it will be easy to lose this outlook. The moment we think we have "arrived" and are no longer on trial is a dangerous moment indeed.

In one sense we are "on trial" more than we have ever been. Not only is our own survival at stake in the twentieth century, but the survival of many other parts of the world will be directly determined by the faithfulness of our stewardship. As the succeeding centuries unfold they could well pinpoint the very decades through which we are now passing as the time when a great nation missed a golden opportunity, or when a people demonstrated their dedication and faith in Christian principle and were willing to share their blessings. The ancient charge to Abraham is still the divine commission to all who receive God's special counsel, "Be thou a blessing."

If we take the short view of hours only it is so easy to become confused and believe the world is on trial before us. Pilate made this mistake and history now looks back and rightly concludes that Jesus was not really on trial at all before the Roman governor. A college forum once held a series of discussions in which the question was raised as to whether the Christian faith would be able to stand the onslaughts of the present scientific age. It presented the picture of religion trembling on its knees before the academic mind. In truth, the picture is completely reversed, and it is the scientific age which stands trial in the twentieth century.

We know what the centuries are saying about the work of the founders of this nation. What will they say about the extent of our planning, the length of our vision, the heritage that we shall pass on to those who take the torch from our hands?

8

A Labor of Love

(A Sermon for Labor Day Sunday)

Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joses, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him
(Mark 6:3).

The Christian pulpit needs to say a great deal more than it has on the theme of the relationship between a man's religion and his work. A number of reasons could be found to undergird this statement. For one thing a person's work consumes the bulk of his waking hours, and if we are grossly unhappy here, no matter what the reason may be, the joy of living is going to be hard to come by. Another reason is the pressing need for the Christian principle to be incorporated into the shops and offices of the nation. Still another reason is to be found in the fact that the founder of Christianity was a laborer with his hands—a shopkeeper, a carpenter.

Although our picture of Jesus does not usually run along these lines, the biblical evidence is there. We think of Jesus as preacher and teacher, and he was. We think of him as Redeemer and Saviour, and he is. But he was also a carpenter. The Bible does not give great detail at this point but it gives enough for us to use an intelligent imagination and come up with some reliable facts.

That Jesus was a carpenter there is no doubt. The text makes this clear. That Jesus was the oldest in a family of a number of children is also a matter of record. We know that he had half brothers, for their names are given; and in like manner reference is made to his sisters, so there were at least two. Tradition tells that Joseph died when Jesus was a young man, and his absence in the narrative during the ministry of Jesus would substantiate this. Therefore, the burden of family provision would fall heavily upon the shoulders of Mary and Jesus. We know the family was poor because, when they went to the Temple to dedicate Jesus, they used the sacrifice customarily employed by people of small means. Hence, the oldest son in a poor family of at least eight persons surely ran the carpenter's shop for a number of years.

Also, it needs to be pointed out that this was by no means lost time in the redemptive ministry of Jesus. What better insight into human nature could one receive than to work for a living, to labor with one's hands, to work with other people, first as an apprentice, and then as a shopkeeper? Jesus saw life firsthand from the viewpoint of those who depended upon their business for the necessities of life. He also faced the problems which always arise when two or more people try to work together in close proximity. He knew what it was to work for one who knew a great deal more than he did, as was certainly true when Joseph was alive. He knew the patience necessary to teach someone else a task which he knew well and could do by second nature, so to speak. I am sure the workers in his shop must have haggled among themselves and claimed there was favoritism in one direction or another. He must have been on the receiving end of a request for a raise more than once.

All of these considerations somehow bring Jesus down to the place where we live and dwell—where we are. That

verse in Hebrews may have wider interpretation than we realize when it records that he "was in all points tempted like as we are" (4:15). Jesus was God come down to the human level. I believe he came all the way. There was no viewing with detached emotion the problems of life. He knew them because he had experienced them; he was a laborer and a shopkeeper.

The comments of Jesus upon this section of human life will be unusually pertinent, because he comes with background and experience. The emphasis here is at the same place where Jesus always puts it; he had a great deal more to say about the worker than he did about the work. This fits in with the whole Christian philosophy of life—people are more important than things. And the conclusion which follows is that we can adjust conditions until we have perfection personified, but if the worker has not made some adjustment, all our manipulating will be in vain.

Almost within our generation we have run the course of improving working conditions, shortening hours, and raising salaries. But employers are still complaining about unhappy workers, and I am told that job-hopping is the favorite pastime of many employees. Perhaps it was necessary in former generations for the Christian pulpit to speak a needed word in behalf of the oppressed worker, as in the days of John Wesley. But today workers have united with great strength and they can hold their own in any battle with management. In this day a word needs to be said that will help the worker to escape the oppression of his own attitudes and shortsightedness. This is where Jesus seemed to place the emphasis.

One thing that will help here is to have the attitude that all work can be sacred. This is not to say that all work is sacred, or that all work is of equal strength in its relation to

the kingdom of God. But the attitude that one's work can serve man and, in turn, serve God is possible.

All too often we have drawn the line that separates the secular from the sacred and have based our action solely on what is done. Preaching the gospel is sacred; plastering a wall is secular. The distinction may or may not be true. The preacher can be prompted by motives that are impure and ends that are totally selfish, thus rendering a sacred work very unsacred. The plasterer can be prompted by the desire to serve and to do a job as it ought to be done, demonstrating all the while his Christianity in his relationships with other workers and his reactions when all does not go well. Hence, in this latter case a secular work becomes more than a job, it becomes an expression of a Christian workman. The point is this: The *why* of our work has a great deal more to do with its secular or sacred character than the *what* of our work. The best task in the world can be degraded by selfish motives and the most menial chore can be elevated by relating it to human need. Remember the words of Jesus, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. 25:40).

In passing, it ought to be noted that work came from the hand of God not as a punishment but as a fulfilment. Before sin entered into the picture and God reacted against the disobedience of his creatures, work was assigned. Genesis 2:15 reads, "And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it." Not until the third chapter of Genesis was the fellowship broken and the penalty imposed.

Perhaps our trouble is that we have looked upon simple tasks as though God were unconcerned about them. We need to remember that God made the kind of world that required many simple tasks. It is at this point that we need

to bear in mind that Jesus was a carpenter and a shop-keeper, and that he was a carpenter a great many more years than he was a preacher. I have always liked to think of Jesus' having the ideal life that was unified completely. I think he preached with his hammer just as he preached from Peter's boat or the steps of the Temple. His whole life was his Father's business.

An interesting observation can be made here on a text that is quite familiar to us. When Jesus was a boy and had been taken to the Temple, you remember his parents started home only to discover Jesus was not in the party. When they returned and found him in the Temple disputing with the doctors and lawyers, Mary rebuked him for causing them such anxiety. Jesus replied, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). We have always printed the word "father" with a capital letter. But suppose Jesus meant it to be a small letter and the reference was to Joseph's business. We do know that Jesus went back to his father's carpenter shop.

Jesus seemed to preach a single sermon; he preached with his life first and with his profession second. Somehow the fact that Jesus would take a common thing of life like his trade and use it to the glory of God is thoroughly biblical and well pleasing to God. If the reference then is a return to Joseph's business, the thrust of meaning would be that Jesus surely would return to his manual labor; he would glorify God with a hammer and a nail, as well as with a lecture and a miracle.

Like ancient Nicodemus, a natural question comes to our minds: "How can these things be?" Surely no one would question the value of letting a sacred glow hover over the common tasks of life, but how? Two suggestions are worth considering.

First, our work must pass the test of being consistent with the Christian ethic. This is a double edge that cuts toward the work and also toward the worker. It must be honest, needed, and done according to the rules of basic integrity. How easy it is to cheat in a day of mass production where the end product is touched by so many hands that a deficiency is difficult to pinpoint to a particular personality. Couple this to a growing conception that cheating only becomes wrong when you are exposed, and the difficulty of having work pleasing to God is intensified. Because the corporation is large, it is all right; because it is the United States Government, we can abandon the paths of honesty. Why is it people who are honest in every respect think it all right to cheat on the income tax return? The inconsistency of our moral principles will rob our work of its sacred character every time.

A second suggestion that will help maintain the sacred character in the common task is to bear in mind that the work must claim a part of the workman. In a day when machines can do so many complicated operations, which in former years were done by human fingers, many a product can claim nothing of human personality in its making. In fact, many things that we use can have said about them, "untouched by human hands." This surely makes for sanitary conditions but it also removes the last vestige of personal pride in one's work. Say what you will, there is something about a job well done in which you had a part that lifts the level of life.

All of us have had this kind of experience. You work in an office year after year, and then the time comes for a change, either to a new job or a shift of status. As you leave your old desk you have the feeling that a part of you will always be there. Now there isn't anything wrong with this at all; it is as

right as right can be. Personal involvement in the task is an absolute essential, involvement to the extent that our happiness is increased if the job is done right and our sorrow is present if the job is done amiss. Like so many things in life, a worker who would share in a sacred task must run the risk of being hurt if he would experience the joy of fulfilment in his work. The detached worker whose only goal is five o'clock and the weekly pay check will never know either of these experiences; he is not badly hurt by a poor performance and he is not lifted by a job well done. So he settles back into the humdrum routine that is the lot of the thousands who will board their commuter buses on Tuesday morning of this week and begin the weary grind all over again.

The late Bishop Crotty of England¹ tells of a sixteen-year-old girl who lay dying in a hospital. She was the eldest child in a large family. The early death of her parents had all too soon thrust on her young shoulders the burden of the care of siblings. She had literally worked herself to death. Her face was white and drawn, her hands rough with the years of hard toil.

Visiting the hospital ward one day was a well-meaning church worker who inquired into the religious background of this young girl. Had she gone to church, had she held office, had she been baptized, and a host of other questions to which was given the weary answer, "No." The heavy sacrifice of home life for others had ruled all this out. Then the sharp question came, "What will you do now when you die and have to tell Christ all these things?" The young girl who had given herself in daily toil for others slowly but firmly placed her hands outside the cover, and with eyes that possessed a peace too deep to be disturbed gave an answer almost too sublime for comment.

"You ask me what I will tell Jesus, I shall show him my

hands." Hands that had been scarred and broken in sacrificial work for others somehow would find understanding in the eyes of Jesus, who had made a living by driving nails and who had wrought out our redemption by the print of the nails in his hands.

How like Jesus who, when he was asked by Thomas for the evidences of a redeeming sacrifice, invited the doubting disciple to come see his hands. Would we be hard-pressed to find evidence of our sacrifice in the Lord's work?

As industry moves toward further mechanization, and as the fact looms larger and larger that the workman can be replaced by a machine, a labor of love that involves the sacrifice of the workman will be increasingly difficult to accomplish. However, the deeper satisfactions of life never come when we escape our duty but when we fulfil our responsibility. We, too, must be about our Father's business.

9

The Gauge of Gratitude

(A Sermon for Thanksgiving)

Hearken to me, ye that follow after righteousness, ye that seek the Lord: look unto the rock whence ye are hewn, and to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged
(Isa. 51:1).

When the prophets of Israel wanted the Hebrews to be at their best they reminded them of their heritage. Their God was the Father of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; as a people, they were the sons of David; and in our text they were called upon to remember "the rock whence ye were hewn." The prophet seemed to realize that Israel was in danger of being cut off from the past, a tragic event for any nation.

We owe a great deal to those who have gone before us. The roots that produce such abundant fruitage are deep in the soil of bygone years. On Thanksgiving Day these sentiments are unusually appropriate. This is distinctly an American holiday, and it is right that we should remember the "rock from whence we have been hewn," as thoughts turn naturally to the Pilgrim Fathers. It was out of their sacrifice that our own good land was carved; it was out of their high spiritual purpose that so many of the foundations of American liberty had their birth; and it was out of their self-discipline that a wilderness was turned into a civilization.

When we think of the discipline of the Pilgrim Fathers, contrasted with our lack of the same quality, the chasm is wide and deep. How many today would endure the crossing of the Atlantic in a sailboat that measured 26 by 113 feet, much less the landing on the inhospitable New England Coast for a bitter Massachusetts winter? At one time in that first winter the daily ration of those who were well was five grains of corn. Half of their number had already taken their places on the wind-swept graveyard on the hill. Is it any wonder that early America developed a pioneer spirit that resembled Abraham's trek from Ur of the Chaldees to the Promised Land? The American pioneer and Father Abraham were empowered by faith in the same God.

There is yet another point of contrast between us and the Pilgrim Fathers on this Thanksgiving Day. Granted that early America endured inimitable hardship and physical deprivation, the fact remains that in the area of practicing gratitude and being thankful our task is infinitely more difficult than was theirs. This cuts across one of the fundamental aspects of human experience; namely, that without effort we appreciate and are grateful for either that which we do not possess or that which we have possessed and have lost. The Pilgrims qualified for thanksgiving on both counts; you and I will qualify on neither in most cases. They appreciated food because they had been hungry; they appreciated protection because they had been attacked; they appreciated shelter because they had been cold; they appreciated friends because they had been lonely; they valued freedom because they had been oppressed.

There is no suggestion that on this day we transplant ourselves into the state of destitution of the early seventeenth century; this would be one way, but not a very practical one. However, there is the suggestion that Americans face a

difficult task in being thankful. It will take a great deal more effort and energy than attending a worship service to stand before our God and "remember the rock out of whence we have been hewn."

Granted that we have been an ungrateful people and granted that this stems in large measure from our large supply of blessing and prosperity, what can we do about it? The commands in the Bible regarding thanksgiving are too abundant for us to ignore the problem. Perhaps we have been looking in the wrong places for the foundations of thanksgiving and using the wrong gauge for our gratitude. Has not the focus been upon the blessing, the particular type of goodness that we have received? "God has been good to me, and all about me are evidences of that goodness; therefore, I have cause for gratitude." The obvious implication is that if in one's judgment God has not been good to him, if there is no discernible evidence of abundant good fortune upon which he can touch his finger, then his cause for gratitude will be greatly diminished, if not altogether absent. Somehow the outlook that bases thanksgiving solely on the abundance of possession more nearly resembles selfishness than it does thankfulness.

Look at what this attitude can do for life. For one thing, gauging the gratitude by the gift instead of the giver, by the blessing instead of the source, will cause us to place ourselves in the position of being the judge between what is good for us and what is not good for us. We have always thought that giving thanks was one of the safest, if not the simplest, aspects of our religion. But if we direct our focus on what we have received, weigh it out, count it by number, and place a value upon it, using the only standard we have, which is our own judgment, we shall overlook some of life's greatest blessings or even give thanks for some things that

in the final analysis may completely ruin our lives. Most of us have lived long enough to know that what may appear as unmixed blessing one year can in the backward look turn out to be a curse that ruined some of life's finest qualities. Many a man has made his money and lost his soul or received his promotion and lost his friends. Even churches have succeeded gloriously until they became miserable failures insofar as representing the fellowship of Christ in their particular society.

The Bible furnishes ample illustration of this truth. The Hebrews hardly thanked God for their long captivity by the waters of Babylon; yet, out of this experience of adversity they developed, through their prophets, some concepts of God and religion that formed the foundation of New Testament theology. They discovered that God could be worshiped in places other than Jerusalem, and it was at this time in their history that they began to learn that the individual must stand on his own feet.

The illustration can be carried further when we realize that insofar as producing a literature that was to bless all mankind, it was not during the periods of peace and prosperity that Israel wrote her masterpieces, but often during the suffering and pinch of oppression and loneliness. The Psalms of the Old Testament abound in the virtue of thanksgiving, and so many of them were penned during the captivity. Paul further illustrated this same sequence as he wrote from prison, in the very shadow of his death sentence. We must remember that it is the Christian faith that carries with it the hymns of thanksgiving. This element is conspicuously absent from Islam and Buddhism, and even Romanism does not make as much of gratitude as does Protestantism.

The principle here is worth remembering, for if the focus

is on the giver rather than the gift we shall be able to give thanks in all conditions of life. Paul emphasized this truth when he said, "In every thing give thanks" (1 Thess. 5:18). We can be thankful *in* a condition where we might never be thankful *for* a condition. The story is told that in his old age James Madison was beset with much illness, took much medicine, but managed to keep on living. An old friend in the adjoining county of Albemarle sent him a box of vegetable pills of his own production and begged to be informed as to their effectiveness. In due time there came this carefully written note: "My dear friend, I thank you for the box of pills. I have taken them all; and while I cannot say that I am better since taking them, it is quite possible that I might have been worse if I had not taken them."¹ Being thankful in all circumstances!

Consider a second step. Not only will this focus on the giver rather than the gift save us from improper evaluation between what is blessing and what is not blessing, it will also enable us to receive the gift.

Paul reminds us that one of the forgotten Beatitudes of Jesus is "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Giving, of course, is a blessed activity but Jesus also stated that receiving is a blessed activity. He implied that one of the reasons we have not been able to give is that we have not first learned to receive.

How important this is in the everyday affairs of life. There are all kinds of gifts that we should be delighted to receive, provided the right person is the donor. For example, a secretary in a downtown office arrived home one afternoon during the Christmas season to discover a large package addressed to her. Upon opening it she found a mink coat. Not very many women are adverse to being on the receiving end of a gift like that. She was overjoyed until she picked up the

card to see in whose gratitude she had been placed. The coat was from her boss. Carefully the costly garment was put back in the box that it might be returned. This young woman had a problem and the boss's wife, though she may not have yet known it, had an even greater problem. Wisely the coat was returned because the young secretary did not want to assume the obligation that went with it. Her proper evaluation of the giver, as well as the gift, brought all of this into sharp focus.

One of the main reasons we are reticent to become grateful or to express genuine thanksgiving is because we do not want to assume the obligations that invariably go with genuine gratitude. To receive is to owe, and we escape this inroad into our life by refusing to admit that we are obligated to anyone for anything. There are human relationships in which we can make this claim stick, but no man can stand in the presence of his Maker and escape the inevitables of obligation.

On Thanksgiving Day we focus largely on the material blessings that we have received from God, and they certainly are large and numerous. But God's supreme gift is not a thing—he is a person. Just as that young woman stared at the coat and said within herself, this implies a relationship which I do not want to exist, an obligation which in no way I want to assume, we can stare at the priceless gift of God our Father and say, by refusing to accept, this implies a relationship which I do not want to exist and an obligation which I do not want to assume. The acceptance of Jesus Christ as Saviour implies and carries with it an obligation gratefully assumed but realistically present.

Our problem then on Thanksgiving and on most any other day in the year in which we think seriously is not with the gift at all. In the case of the supreme gift of God, his Son

Christ Jesus, we want him, especially the forgiveness and redemption that he offers, but we do not always want the obligations that ensue. Yet, in the background of our thinking is the haunting refrain of the Master, "He that taketh not his cross . . . is not worthy of me" (Matt. 10:38). In the careful examination of our gratitude, or lack of it, we may see an all too clear picture of our discipleship, or the lack of it.

There is a third value in gauging our gratitude by the giver instead of the gift. We shall be in the position to appreciate what has been done for us because we will know something of the cost that was involved. Without this insight, gratitude will always escape us.

Parents will sometimes say that their children do not appreciate all that they do for them and all the sacrifice which is endured in their behalf. Unquestionably the parents are right. On the other hand, how could young people possibly know what is involved in the general production of life and the things that go with it? You and I know what life costs because we receive the bills each month. Here is one of the drawbacks of being reared with all things provided; we lack an essential virtue of gratitude. A generation has come on the scene now which does not know a depression or the privation of an all-out war effort, or the blessing of freedom which was bought at great price in "blood, sweat, and tears."

You see, it is one thing to look at received blessings and say, how nice; it is far better to look at the giver of these blessings and become aware of the cost involved that we might have them. In the receiving of life's supreme blessing, the forgiveness of sin and the salvation from the Father's hand, there was also involved a cost. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." More pointedly, "God so loved . . . that he gave up his only Son." This is

what that redemption cost, and it is only in that realization that we shall find gratitude for the supreme blessing. Salvation is free, we have said so often. Free from the standpoint of gold and silver and good works, but in no way is it free from the standpoint of the one who gave it.

Therefore, on Thanksgiving Day, when we wrestle again with the task of being grateful, "Remember the rock whence ye were hewn." In so doing we shall gauge our gratitude on a proper evaluation of what is good and what is not good. We shall recognize the obligation that goes with accepting any gift and also we shall be able to understand the cost involved. The gift or the blessing in question may be the provocation of these reactions, but it is the giver who determines their intensity. With this gauge for our gratitude it will be our relationships that are placed in focus, whether they be human or divine.

10

Shreds and Patches

(A Sermon for Universal Bible Sunday)

From a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15).

In the field of books the Bible has long been the best seller. Through the years this sacred volume has led all the rest, and even though for a brief span of time another book may take the lead, it will soon run the gamut of public approval. The novel which everybody was buying one year, nobody is buying the following year. But the Bible goes on; its approval is not only universal, it is timeless. Surely the reason for its wide and continued acceptance is found in the fact that the Bible speaks to life in every age. It meets the deep-seated needs of the human soul; it points the way to eternal life; it describes the story of our redemption; it is God's saving Word to a lost humanity; it is truly "good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people."

But with all of the aura of glory hovering about the Scriptures and with the continuing distinction of being the best seller year after year, one could raise the serious question as to whether the Bible is the best read book year after year, or any year for that matter. Everybody has a Bible, but not everybody reads it. Some surveys have been taken to see

what people know about the Bible. The results are discouraging indeed. The ignorance of scriptural content is abysmal and astounding. Nor is the dearth of knowledge confined entirely to those outside the inner workings of the church, for the sampling among active religious people gives anything but encouraging results concerning this Book of books.

Why do we not spend more time with the Scriptures? Many a person resolved to read the Bible through this year but bogged down in Leviticus and Numbers only to become lost, along with the Israelites, in the wilderness of the Pentateuch. Only the brave and the stout of heart can trudge through the Old Testament. There are reasons.

For one thing, we venerate the King James translation. While I love the wording and use it much of the time, we need to remember that Jesus and Moses never spoke a word of English and that since 1611 our native tongue has changed considerably. It is passingly strange that Baptists, who are perhaps the last large major denomination to hold tenaciously to the Authorized Version, cling to a translation in which no Baptist had any part in making. What I am saying is that for our study we need to branch out.

A second barrier that has discouraged readers by the thousands is the sequence of the Bible. It is not in the order in which it happened and this presents no small problem. Add to this the repetitions which are often separated by large blocks of material and we begin to see why so much of the Bible remains a real puzzle to the untrained mind.

Now much could be done to help this situation, for the scholarly world has been well aware of these things for generations. What hinders? It is the people. The Bible is the great untouchable in so many minds, and the illusion is held that if you touch a translation you are changing the Bible, when in reality if you do not retranslate from time to time

the Bible will change itself. When the meaning of a word changes we must find another one if we want to say exactly what Paul had in his mind nineteen hundred years ago.

What happens when we plunge into the biblical narrative and become lost? Because we love the Lord, and because we still know that this is the Book of life, we read it in little pieces. This is all we can take at one time, and those little pieces are often the same ones. Instead of a continued story that reveals God to man, the Bible is more like reading the dictionary—interesting, but it changes the subject so often. Shreds and patches, never the whole thing.

I read an interesting story along this line.¹ It was about a woman in one of the suburban neighborhoods who gained wide reputation as a newspaper reader. She took four or five newspapers each day. She was the envy of all the neighbors, for they, like most of us, have enough trouble plowing through one newspaper, let alone four or five. In a group one day, one of her neighbors asked if she read all those papers. "Oh yes," was the quick reply, "I carefully go through all of them." Then they asked her opinion about one of the widely publicized topics of the day and she confessed total ignorance of the event, not to mention having an opinion about it. Then it all came out. She read the newspapers faithfully, but only those little items about a quarter of an inch long used to fill up the end of a column. They were her complete intellectual bill of fare. She was delighted to give her friends a few samples of her vast knowledge: the granite for the Bunker Hill Monument was quarried in Quincy, Massachusetts; gold was discovered in Montana in 1861; the first general roundup of cattle in southwestern Alberta was believed to have been held in 1881; the steamboat museum in Winona, Minnesota, has a calliope whose music can be heard ten miles down the Mississippi River.

Such is the way that many people read the Bible, little pieces at a time. Their theme song might well be:

A wandering minstrel I,
A thing of shreds and patches.

They can say well, "The Lord is my shepherd, let not your heart be troubled, the greatest of these is love," and seriously ask the preacher, "Where can I find that verse in the Bible?"

What does this method of shreds and patches do for us? For one thing, it prevents our getting the whole story. The average man on the street who has a passing acquaintance with the Bible would say that it is composed of two books: the Old Testament and the New Testament. For the more careful student the reply could be made that it is composed of sixty-six books, thirty-nine in the Old Testament and twenty-seven in the New. Both of these answers are right and then, again, both are wrong, for the Bible is essentially one book, telling one story, written by one author, and designed for one purpose. And this *oneness* of the Bible needs to be recaptured.

Sometimes the air can be cleared by saying what a thing is not. The Bible is not a history of the Hebrew nation; it is not an account of the origin of the universe; it is not a means of securing a moral law for life; it is not a means of solving pressing problems of life and nations. It does all of these things, but if this is all that it does, then as a book it fails and falls short.

The Bible is the written record of man's redemption through Jesus Christ. The key word is *redemption*, the key person is *Christ*. From Genesis through Revelation, from Adam to John the Divine sitting in the prison of Patmos, the Bible has one purpose—sinful man's returning to fellowship

with a holy God. How can the wronged relationship be righted? How can a Creator who has been disregarded and disobeyed come into favor again with his creatures, without the creature's losing respect for his Creator? If God would do what so many people want him to do, forget about sin, strange as it may seem every one of us would no longer want to worship that kind of deity. There must be another way, and that way is made plain in the Holy Bible.

We shall not grasp a theme of this magnitude and depth by reading God's Word in shreds and patches. The whole story will never make its entry into our minds, and the Bible will still be no more than David's killing Goliath, or Samson's destroying the temple, or Jesus' feeding five thousand hungry people.

We owe so much to the early Christians at this point. They outsuffered the pagan world; they outdied the pagan world; they outlived in good deeds their contemporaries; but never forget that the early Christians *outthought* the pagan world! The foundation of Christian insight is the Bible, and Christ gave the world its rebirth of scholarship when the candle of information almost flickered and went out centuries later.

Every age must think through its Christian faith and present the gospel in contemporary terms which can be understood. This cannot be done with isolated, unrelated incidents in the history of a nation. The Christmas season is upon us again, but the world does not need to hear the story of the shepherds and the Wise Men nearly so much as it needs to hear that Bethlehem is the closing of one part and the beginning of another; that Christ was born, yes, but that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself.

A second result of shreds and patches is that we admire the Bible without understanding it. How easy to substitute

admiration and reverence for knowledge and understanding and facility of use and acquaintance with purpose and detail, all of which make us good workmen. "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). The Greek phrase which is translated "study" really means "hasten to gain" the approval of God. Admiration will not suffice for the approval of God. Pilate admired Jesus, but Jesus didn't admire Pilate. The Bible presents as a crucial issue God's opinion of us; and to understand rightly his Book that we might cut it straight, as Paul suggested to Timothy, will help in this direction.

The leader of a jazz band once spoke of his musicians in endearing terms. He complimented them on their attitudes and their great love for music. He went on to say that his boys lived music, they ate music, and they slept music. And then he pathetically confessed, "Sometimes I wish they could read music!" Could God say this about us and the Scriptures? We love the Bible, we would not have a coffee table without one, we would not let a public official begin his office without using the Bible, every church prominently displays it on a table or special lectern where the chancel is divided. Yet God may pathetically say about his children, "They love it, I wish they could read it!"

One of the common misconceptions concerning Jesus is the substitution of admiration for acceptance. We love Christ and we love his church and that is all that matters. That is not all that matters. Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." Our admiration for his personality and achievements must fade into our acceptance of his way of life. Likewise with the Bible: We can faithfully worship a carefully bound volume; we can quarrel with anyone who tampers with the translation lest he disturb our com-

placency; we can hallow biblical truth as one stands in awe before a rare museum piece; we can do all these things with the Bible and still fail in the essential transfer of its message into living personality.

That the early church did not have the New Testament is always well to remember. Instead of being the product of the biblical revelation, they became the channel of that revelation.

Consider a third drawback that comes from reading the Bible in shreds and patches. This process robs us of seeing the essential relationships contained in the Scriptures. This was the trouble with the lady who read so many newspapers. She was gorged with information, but the facts were all unrelated and, for the most part, irrelevant.

The Bible is a book of relationships. It begins with humanity's breaking an existing relationship, thus making necessary the whole process and plan of redemption, that a broken relationship might be restored. The Ten Commandments deal with our relationships, first with God and then with our fellow man. The thrust of the gospel message of the New Testament is that this marred relationship can be restored because of the sacrificial death of Christ Jesus.

Learning the facts of the Bible is one thing but it is far better to make personal connection with the message. Thus to be able to quote large passages of Scripture may or may not be significant. The scribes before King Herod at the birth of Jesus could quote from the prophet the exact place of the birth of our Lord, but they made no connection with the fulfillment of prophecy. They directed others to the spot, but they did not go themselves.

Jesus announced his plan of church building when one of his disciples saw a relationship. Peter's confession came in the sixteenth chapter of Matthew as he saw that Jesus of

Nazareth and the Messiah of prophecy were one and the same person. When one fact is connected with another fact, a conclusion is produced. This is the groundwork for real progress and involves, of course, the use of the mind in the tasks of religious activity. Men will give their name, their pocketbook, a small portion of their time, their approval. All of these are donated to the cause of Christianity, and they are all needed; but the kingdom is brought in when men come to Christ with their mind as well as their devotion. Is it any wonder that Jesus rested the future of Christianity on religious education?

The question is timely. How are you reading the Bible—in such little pieces that there is comfort without commitment and interest without involvement? The Bible was written “that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (John 20:31).

11

Keeping Christmas Personal

(A Sermon for Christmas)

Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart (Luke 2:19).

At the Christmas season our personal relationships take on an added significance. This aspect is not only proper but helpful in a generation where so much of life has become institutionalized and is carried out day by day with a detachment from personal involvement. The neighborhood is not nearly so close-knit as it used to be and the modern apartment is the epitome of people living only feet apart but having little or no contact.

This personal aspect of Christmas time finds illustration in several areas. Many of us remember from the last war that being halfway around the world for months and even years at a time is one thing, but to spend Christmas Day on some military outpost is to add difficulty on difficulty. However hardened we may have become with the dubious achievements of modern civilization, the Christmas season makes its annual arrival and reminds us that we are creatures made in the image of God, a God who has given to life's personal relationships not only their deepest meaning but also their highest significance. Thus there is a softness that creeps into pagan and Christian alike in late December; its expression

may be a pretty card, an appropriate gift, a kind word. Or if only the monotonous routine is broken and we pause to see where we are and with whom we work and live, there is lasting value.

Unless we are willing to magnify and recognize the power of personal attachment, the real meaning of Christmas will be difficult to capture. In 1952, a New York City school-teacher invited the pupils to mention things that pertain to Christmas. "Santa Claus," said one, and the teacher wrote that on the board. "Reindeer" . . . "Christmas trees" . . . "presents," the children suggested. Then one little girl said, "the birthday of Jesus." "Oh, no," the teacher replied promptly, "that's not what we mean."¹

In a public school the teacher had to be careful lest a particular religious interpretation be placed on the Christmas season. But however careful one tries to be about Christmas, it has a way of barging into the personal relationships of life. Our present generation may do its best to separate Christmas from direct association with the founder of Christianity, but it will not succeed, for if success should be obtained, Christmas would no longer be. No civilization has been able to keep alive a set of virtues in the abstract; it is when they become personal that they become meaningful. And when they become impersonal and detached, they lose not only their appeal but also their illustration.

How appropriate this is when viewed against the background of the first Christmas. By no means are we adding anything to Christmas, but we are only retaining an aspect that has always been present. Speaking with depth, yet with biblical accuracy, the incarnation of God in Christ is an abstraction becoming a personality. The God of Sinai's thunder and Carmel's lightning lies cradled in the arms of his mother. The power which set the world in motion is now dependent

upon the whims and fancies of human frailty, an innkeeper's direction that brought him to the stable, a pagan king's selection of a particular gift. Was ever any transition more majestic and far-reaching than when God, by his own election, took understandable form and assumed our limitations that he might also become our Saviour and High Priest? God's highest expression of himself was personal.

The consistency of the first Christmas with so many other principles of life is worth noting. We can see it in addition to this divine revelation which intervened into human affairs to answer human needs. So long as good and evil remain as abstract truth without the incarnation of human personality, we shall never understand them or see their results in society. It is when hate finds a heart that is willing and a hand that is ready to grasp a weapon that sin works its worst among men. It is also when love centers in a person and is the interaction among persons that it becomes real. Jesus did not give the command that we are to love, any more than the Ten Commandments tell us to worship, without stating in clear terms what is to be the object of that worship. Jesus said we are to love particular persons, and it is when the abstraction of love finds expression toward a fellow creature that it becomes something alive and effective.

God's Christmas gift was not an ethical system; the world already had that. It was not a cold principle of justice or even mercy. God's gift was his Son, who began at the stage of life where all men begin, that he might be able to call us his brethren. And this is always highly personal. This is illustrated by an incident that took place in 1949 in Muskegon, Michigan. A local savings bank decided to advertise the virtues of thrift on billboards. During the Christmas season this was its message: "There is no Santa Claus—work—earn—save." Strangely enough, this denial of the personality of

Santa Claus aroused so much protest that the bank was forced to alter its advertisement.²

I could not help but think as I read this incident that perhaps one reason for the discontent which the bank encountered may have been because people did not want to lose one of their prime personalities of Christmas. How much better if that personality could be the right one and not a pagan myth. God began Christmas with the birth of a real person. John's brief summary of the incarnation has yet to be surpassed for its beauty and simplicity: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us" (John 1:14).

Consider in the second place that God was not the only one who put into the first Christmas a personal aspect. Those who received the first Christmas gave a personal response. In fact, their response might even be described as an emotional reaction. Look at the various groups with this in mind.

The shepherds were afraid. On first thought this may sound strange but the account is clear—"they were sore afraid." Throughout the biblical record this is the standard response on the part of men when God comes close. His presence causes us to stand in terror. Moses, Isaiah, Samuel, Paul, and others were afraid when God moved into their lives.

Today we are still afraid, but for different reasons. The shepherds looked up and saw the evidence of God and they were afraid of what God would do; we look up and it is not God that we fear but our fellow man. Scarcely has any generation since the dawn of scientific inquiry and the release of man from the superstition of the Middle Ages known more fear than ours. But with all of our knowledge and power we, like the ancient cave man, are burrowing in the ground once again for protection. Jesus told his generation that the time would come when they would want the hills to cover them; his word is still appropriate.

However, between us and the shepherds there is a striking contrast. Their fear drove them to obedience to God, and in that obedience they found joy and peace. Before the night was over they were telling the glad tidings of great joy. With our generation and all of its fear we have yet to be driven to a deep religious faith in spiritual powers. The revival of religion which was so prevalent a few years ago now seems to have subsided. The church moves along with business as usual, still touching less than half the lives of people. If in some way we could stand with the ancient shepherds and be afraid of our Maker again, there might be hope for us to have peace and joy as the fruits of obedience.

Worry was the personal reaction of Herod and the scribes. In one sense they had cause to worry, for in this child born at Bethlehem there was a threat to the existing order of things. History would bear out in vivid detail the fact that Jesus disturbed and changed all he touched. Although there are not many lessons we can take from Herod as to the right thing to do, the fact that he lost sleep over Jesus is one that many would do well to emulate. We are troubled about many things; but Jesus, even at Christmas time, is seldom one of them.

And then the Wise Men were involved personally in the first Christmas to the point of being lost. They were steeped in all kinds of knowledge, but they were still lost. The knowledge that would bring them to "the way, the truth, and the life" was still not theirs. Again the characters in the drama serve as worthy of emulation. Would that we could do as the Wise Men, i.e., recognize that we do not know the way and thereby ask.

Fear, worry, confusion are all personal reactions to the coming of Jesus. While in themselves they are not sufficient for Christian maturity, they can lead to the Christ child if

we will but follow through. We must be interested to the point of involvement.

The task then that faces each of us at the Christmas season is not the recognition of historical fact or even the additional achievement of experiencing mixed emotions. What we need is that personal connection with Christ, and this can be absent even though we love the stories of Christmas and we firmly believe that Jesus lived and taught and redeemed. Our quarrel is not that Jesus falls short of being the Saviour of the world, but that we lack that inner sense that he is our Saviour. Let us face it frankly. To how many of us is Jesus nothing more than an ancient character? We stand with almost two thousand years between us and him and Palestine seems so far away. The poet puts it well:

Dim tracts of time divide
 Those golden days from me;
 Thy voice comes strange o'er years of change;
 How can I follow thee?

FRANCIS TURNER PALGRAVE

How can we keep Christmas personal? In the description in Luke's Gospel of Mary's activities there is an interesting word that may help us. "Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). The word for "ponder" is from a compound, and it means "to throw together." Mary, perhaps of all the people surrounding the birth of Christ, demonstrated a calm acceptance and a studied evaluation of what was happening. And, as she put things together in her own mind, she injected into her own religious experience the indispensable element of imagination. The prophecy which she had heard, and now the fulfilment which she had seen, drew her into a vital relationship—a relationship that was much more than the normal mother-child context.

Think how divine is the gift of imagination and the barriers of time and distance which it can erase. How could these folk who surrounded the birth of Jesus conceive of what God was like? They were like Helen Keller, trying to imagine sound in a world she could not hear and color in a world she could not see. Miss Keller's expression of what she thought color was is interesting. "Gray," she says, "is like a soft shawl around the shoulders." Trying to express color in terms of touch is not easy.

The birth of Jesus on the first Christmas has given us the raw material with which we can use an intelligent imagination to recapture the personal aspect of this event. We know what Jesus was like in definite terms. We know what he spoke, what he did, what he wanted then, and what he expects now from his followers. In fact, if we use our imagination at all the outline of the Christ comes sharp and clear, and we are faced with commands which we have not obeyed and attitudes which we have evaded.

Celebrating Christmas will not be difficult, but keeping Christmas is a matter that is much more involved. Several years ago my wife and I did not have a Christmas tree in the house. I still remember the amazement of one of the neighbors who happened to come by the house. That there should not be a tree in the home of a minister was unthinkable; yet the same neighbor did not go to church and resisted all invitations in that direction. When Christmas is reduced to a personal basis, the personality of its founder will be involved. Anyone can celebrate a holiday, but not everyone can keep Christmas in the right spirit. At this Christmas season, when our other personal relationships come into such sharp focus, our most important personal relationship should emerge for re-examination, our relationship with God through Christ.

12

The Day Moses Grew Up

(A Sermon for Youth Week)

One day, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his people
(Ex. 2:11, RSV).

When do people grow up? When does a boy become a man? Often physical maturity comes to a teen-ager, and he achieves his height quite quickly, but when he gets a little older he will mature in other realms.

Some grow up in a relatively short time. A young man finds himself thrust into the world of adult responsibility long before he is ready, and there is no choice but to do his best. I saw it time and again in World War II. I remember well the night before the invasion—nineteen-year-old boys talked like men for the first time in their lives and showed concern about the eternal things in life. When young people meet tragedy and crisis at an early age they may discover they will never again be satisfied with the frivolity they once admired so greatly. Sometimes young people about to be married are introduced to the idea that once a couple meets at the marriage altar they are in the adult world whether they choose to be or not. They must meet the problems all the rest of us face, like paying bills and washing dishes.

There is no set time and there is no established place, but we will not depart too much from the brief pattern in our text.

It all happened one day when Moses decided to go from the palace yard down to the brickyard, for when he returned from this visit he had made the transition into maturity. He was no longer the son of Pharaoh's daughter, but the crusading leader of a despised people whose only asset was the presence of God.

Three things happened on that day; when they did, Moses grew up. When they happen to us, we also will grow up, whether we are fifteen or fifty.

Moses grew up when he became socially conscious.—It is hard for us to imagine Moses, a palace favorite, taking time to go down where the slaves were working. The fact that he got that far away from his soft cushions and easy living is amazing. But the text gives the clue—he went out among his *brethren*. Just how he made the discovery that he was a Hebrew, we do not know. Such a discovery is always a test of character and a mark of maturity. When we are willing to acknowledge our debt to our heritage, we are making real progress.

Moses had come to the end of a long journey that day when he went out to see how the brethren were getting along; it was the end of the longest journey that a human being ever makes. In my life I have been halfway around the world and have crossed both the equator and the international date line, but those are only little evening outings compared with the journey that covers the distance from the pronoun "I" to the pronoun "we." Take the "I" out of some conversations and it would reduce the verbiage by at least 50 per cent! Like the flat wheel of a railroad car, it goes clacking along I—I—I—I. This is the old and simple lesson that

unselfishness is a mark of maturity, and when we cast off our selfishness and acquire a concern for those around us, we grow up. And the size of that circle varies in direct proportion to the extent of our growth.

It is not difficult to be unselfish and concerned for those who are in a position to return favors or do something for us. The real test comes when our social consciousness goes beyond the realms where we personally will benefit by it. How is your social concern for the boy or girl that is not socially accepted and walks the path of loneliness and ostracism, yearning for just a kind word or a smile that acknowledges that in the eyes of other people he or she is alive?

Moses had nothing to gain by that trip to the brickyard. Those Hebrew slaves could not do anything for him, but he could do a world of good for them! If you really want to grow up, go out of your way to help someone who cannot return the favor. And labor under no illusions that social consciousness is achieved at the age of twenty-one, thirty-one, or fifty-one. Some people collect their social security long before they collect their social consciousness. We can easily be conscious only of those of our own theological opinion, or economic position, or status on the totem pole of social prestige. Draw the application clearly. Can you name anything about which you are vitally aware that in no way will benefit you personally or contribute to your own ambitions and desires. Have you ever done anything from a motive of pure altruism—because it was right and because you cared about high principle and lasting virtue? How large is the circle of your awareness? It is an unmistakable indicator of your growth.

Moses grew up when he became concerned.—When one can look on human injustice and become incensed, maturity is setting in—he is growing up fast. Moses saw that what was happening to his brethren was not right. Now to be

sure, his concern was like a fit of temper, and he expressed it in the wrong way; nevertheless, he was capable of becoming indignant. Killing the Egyptian taskmaster was no solution to the problem, for the trouble was not in the overseer of the Hebrew slaves. Rather, it was much farther down the line and would have to be dealt with at that point. While we shall have to agree that Moses acted hastily and unthinkingly, we shall also have to agree that he picked a pretty good matter over which to lose his temper. This injustice, human slavery, was worth the ire of any man. Moses was not the last man to become concerned over this.

Even God was capable of anger—and still is. If we have the idea that God is an old man with a long white beard, whose temper is never raised, and who never becomes upset and incensed with his human creatures, we are mistaken. I don't know where people get this picture of God, but it does not come from the Bible. I do not find where he will say to his creatures, regardless of their response to his love, "Now don't you worry about a thing, everything is going to be all right." I see him waxing hot against the Hebrews; I see him revealing ten rules of conduct called the Ten Commandments; and when God says "thou shalt not," he means just that. No smile is going to play across his lips when we come before him time and again having broken these rules. God is not a good fellow; he is the good Father! There is a vast difference.

Jesus was capable of intense concern. When men desecrated his Father's house, his indignation expressed itself so strongly that he drove them out. When the disciples were inexcusably slow in exerting the mental effort to think through their religious faith, Jesus sighed out indignantly, "Will you ever learn?" When little children were sent away, Jesus rebuked those who had come between him and the child.

The apostle Paul was a man with a trigger temper and a red-hot disposition as he thundered out against the evils of his day.

When one has learned to control his temper and to use the God-given capacity for anger in constructive channels, he has gone a long way toward growing up. The suggestion is not "blow up" but "grow up." There is a vast difference! The trouble with most of us is that we blow up over a triviality—a button on a shirt collar, someone doesn't speak to us with the right inflection, or he cuts us out of a parking place. We can stand face to face with sin at its worst and say with calm assurance, "This is not my affair." The trouble with Pontius Pilate was his unconcern over injustice. He watched a man go to the cross whom he knew to be innocent, and his only regret was that his morning had been disturbed.

Moses grew up when he was willing to become involved.—This third step is important. One will never reform society or usher in a small portion of the kingdom of God until he enters this door of maturity—one of the gateways of growth. When a man is willing to admit his involvement with his fellow man, this is a step beyond consciousness of condition, it is the place in which he finds himself in the picture. The Hebrews' lot became Moses' lot.

We are interested in the things of which we are a part, in which we are involved. Do you ever notice someone looking at a group picture, a picture which he knows he is in? He hunts frantically for his own likeness. "How did I come out?" The point is *he* is in the picture. Are you going to appear in the picture of humanity as a scoffer, a detached observer, a bored spectator, an interested bystander, or better still, as one with sympathetic eagerness? So often those of us who ought to know better have not done very well in setting examples and establishing patterns. The absence of communi-

cation, the rebellion against authority, and the desire to escape are all too prevalent in the generation approaching maturity in this mid-twentieth century. Could it be the youth has taken his cue from the adults about him? We cannot transfer a discipline which we do not possess nor transfer a faith which is not ours.

Moses committed himself on that day when he saw injustice. He became concerned and resolved to do something about it—he kept that commitment! This is always a real mark of having grown up. Young people ought to form the habit of doing what they say they will do. How good is your word? When a small child forgets what he has said he would do or changes his mind because something more interesting comes along, it is understandable. We attribute his failure to immaturity; but if one is ever to grow up, that trait must be set aside.

This business of growing up can be painful and disturbing. It is far easier to allow someone else to solve the problems of society, pay the bills, do the hard work, and make all the difficult decisions. I know of few things more frustrating than trying to work with someone who refuses to grow up, who is irresponsible, undisciplined, and undependable. And on the other side of the picture, I know of few things more rewarding and satisfying than working with people who have mature minds and judgments, who meet disappointments, solve problems, and face the work like adults ought to face the world. Whenever we are able to see that there is inherent in being in this world a responsibility for its condition, we become a part of the social picture. With all of its opportunities, life is not without its corresponding responsibilities. One of the highest acts of human heroism of which we are capable is when we will admit to ourselves and our God our involvement in the struggle for human lib-

erty. We are then willing to identify ourselves with the oppressed of the land.

Christ is the supreme example of such involvement. No personal gain was his, for he identified himself with the oppressed, and "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8). Moses demonstrated a threefold progression in his march toward maturity. He became aware, he became concerned, and he became involved. At which level do you stand?

13

Strings and Buttons

(A Sermon for Budget Sunday)

On the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee (Luke 10:35).

During the Korean War it was observed time and again that in one of the collection centers for old clothes women's coats came in with all the buttons cut off. Evidently some big-hearted, generous soul thought the buttons were quite good and could be used again; so, a hasty snip of the scissors rendered a useful gift much less useful. It was Lowell who said, "The gift without the giver is bare." We might add that a coat without the buttons may leave the receiver bare as well.

Giving is not of necessity a virtue. Unless we are thoughtful we can render the finest generosity null and void by a quick snip of the scissors. That which would normally be useful and helpful becomes much less valuable simply because we "cut off the buttons" before we part with our gift. This matter of giving is one of the most difficult things that we shall achieve as Christians. Of course the mere achieving of a numerical standard is not difficult; a check with the right amount on it can fulfil that obligation. But to have be-

hind that signature on the check motives and purposes worthy before God is more difficult to accomplish. Some little selfishness, some little expression of ulterior motive can spoil the whole thing and make our giving nothing more than paying a bill.

It is like the farmer who came in one morning and sat down to breakfast after milking the cow. His wife very routinely inquired, "Well, how much milk did the cow give this morning?" He answered grimly, "Nine quarts and a kick." The kick easily took care of the nine quarts and the farmer came home with an empty bucket. The story is amusing but illustrates what humanity does with unfailing regularity. We give things with apparent magnanimous generosity, and then to prove that we did not really want to make that gift in the first place, we let go a kick that turns it all for naught.

All we do religiously throws a shaft of light on the real condition of our faith. When we open the door to let something come out, we expose ourselves—if only for a brief second. When the coat comes through without the buttons, it not only tells us that the coat is not much good like it is, but also that the giver is not much good like he is. Or, if we manage to leave all the buttons, the next temptation is to tie it all up with strings and attachments and conditions and provisions. The result is that we never really turn loose of our gift and let it run free to bless all who can benefit by it. Here is the message—don't cut off the buttons, but by all means untie all the strings. This will bring the joy back into one of the most delightful things in all the world—sacrificial giving.

The good Samaritan in our text had the right idea. "Take care of this wounded man." That would have been generous by all standards. But he added, "and if there's any extra expense, I'll pay that, too." No strings attached, and all the

buttons left intact. He would have been a first-class church member!

Look at the application of this in two vital areas: first, the gift, and second, the giver. Does God jump up and down with glee every time we decide to make a contribution to his work? Not necessarily. Just because the church is glad to get whatever comes in is no indication that God is so ordered. For God does something which the church is not qualified to do—he looks carefully at the motive of the giver. And the buttons can be cut off here with tremendous speed. Never underestimate the “might of the motive.” It can ruin all that we may do in our Christian life, all the way from coming to church to introducing a lost person to the Lord Jesus Christ. Even a sermon can be marred in the sight of God if the preacher’s motive is amiss.

All too often we have been willing in the measure of our generosity to stop with the question, “How much?” And once that is settled the matter is closed, for after all this is what it is going to cost us. When the average American spends six cents a day for religious purposes, nine cents a day for tobacco, fifteen cents for alcohol, and twenty-three cents a day for recreation, the question of “how much” becomes urgent and many need to face it.

Sitting on the front porch one summer evening a group of people were engaged in the dying art of conversation. As often happens, things grew a bit dull. Not wishing to solve all the problems of the universe immediately, someone asked what was the most beautiful word in the English language. Ruling out “mother,” “heaven,” and “home,” a number of euphonic words were introduced, and like the croquet game in *Alice in Wonderland* everybody won and everybody got a prize. Then someone asked the opposite question. Limiting the answers quite wisely to words that could be found in the

dictionary, there was no general agreement as to the ugliest word in the English language. About that time a little boy wandered out on the porch, thus reminding his mother that it was his bedtime. Like most little boys he was a bit reluctant to surrender to the inevitable. So, the mother said to him, "Come now, let's go upstairs and say a teeny-weeny little prayer, and then to bed!" When they had gone and quiet settled again, one of the group said quietly, "That's the word we've been fishing for. When used before the right noun, that adjective "little" can be the ugliest word in the English language."

Let your mind linger at this point and the impact is terrific. It is that deadly and dangerous illusion cherished and practiced by so many that in the matters of faith, prayer, and other things religious "a little" is all that is either desirable or necessary. Little people (who have not been little in size for twenty years), saying little prayers, to a little God, about little problems, supported by little faith, consuming a little time, and expecting a little answer. This presumes that there is nothing big or important or time-consuming in this matter of Christianity. God doesn't really expect anything. He is on our side and delighted with whatever scraps of time, energy, and resources we may deem advisable to toss in his direction. Yes, that word "little" can be a terrible one when used to modify the right noun. And the reason for its horror lies in the fact that it goes completely against the grain of the biblical picture of God and what he *does* and what he *requires*. Where did we ever get the idea that God is little, or that he expects a little response?

Jesus gave the right picture of God when he fed the five thousand and the disciples gathered up twelve baskets of what was left over. These were not scraps to be thrown away; they were the pieces which had yet to be distributed among

the people. Our God is a God of abundance and there is no frugality in his economy. He always gives enough and to spare; he goes beyond all that we can think or ask. Nowhere in this Bible does it say that God will settle for a *little* response on the part of humanity toward the gift of his Son. In fact, it is just the opposite. He wants *all* that we have.

Even when we pass with flying colors this test of "how much," there is the other question of "why." The consistency of our faith shines through beautifully at this point if we will let it, for our answer should be for the same reason that we come to church, witness to lost people, teach a Sunday school class, or sing in the choir—because we love the Lord. Consequently, if we want to "restore the joy of our salvation," so to speak, we shall work on it in exactly the same place that initially we exerted effort and prayer; i.e., our relationship with God through Christ. No wonder Jesus came to Peter after the resurrection and asked three times, "Peter, do you love me?" We can make it difficult for God to pour out his blessing when our motives are impure and faulty.

God is concerned with the amount of the gift, but he is *more* concerned about the *giver*. What about the gift of life? Are there any buttons left on the "coat of life" that you gave to God? Are there strings attached so that God does not really have control of it? These are searching questions and deserve serious consideration. Did you snip off the buttons before you gave it to God so that what ought to have been useful was greatly impaired? You can easily cut the buttons off the gift of a Sunday morning worship hour by sitting there planning the week or reliving the previous one to the point that you do not have the slightest idea as to what the sermon is about. Or, you can snip the buttons off by coming into the worship service tired and worn out from staying out late on Saturday night. Inspiration and physical exhaustion

just do not go together. We must meet God when we are at our best.

Let us remember that in this life the body and the mind are connected. To illustrate further—buttons make things useful because they connect one thing with another. An ornamental button may be gone a long time before it is missed, since it never works its way into a buttonhole. But a button that holds the coat or the garment in place will be missed as soon as the last thread lets go and only the buttonhole is left. It is then in our connections, our associations, our contacts, our relationships that life finds its usefulness for Christ. In fact, it is the one who is willing to be “tied down” that can count for the kingdom of God. The description of a Christian is not foot-loose and fancy-free. Rather, it is one who has found life’s supreme obligation and who has given himself to a great cause. Jesus was not only willing to be “tied down” in our behalf, he was willing to be *nailed down* that we might have redemption. Life then that has not carefully examined its relationships and connections cannot be used effectively in the Master’s service. Our connection with God and our connection with our fellow man are important considerations.

The fundamental principle involved here is that real giving means that we relinquish control. The strings of our direction are severed and the new owner issues the directives. We are willing to accept the free gift of salvation and the forgiveness of our sins through the blood of Calvary’s cross; we are even willing to serve our Lord *providing*—and here is the string; yea, chain would be more descriptive, for it is far too strong to be called a string—we can determine the extent of our involvement, the precise moment of our resignation, the area in which we are to serve, and the associates with whom we are to work. A string tied to life? We make a puppet look

like a free man! In other words, the individual can do exactly what a church can do with its giving—designate every part of it. Just as the denomination receives an enormous amount which cannot be used, so God receives a life which cannot serve where the need is greatest or even where talents and abilities are most abundant.

God uses us primarily in the business of touching other lives. A Christian is a connector by which he draws his fellow man to Christ. But if life has lost all of its buttons and all of its connections it is a gift that cannot be used!

Perhaps there is no area in our Christianity that could benefit more from a serious reappraisal than the matter of our stewardship. What are we doing and why are we doing it? God's primary act toward us was a gift; hence, our gift toward God comes in for vital consideration.

A young man went into a drugstore, lifted the receiver off the hook, and dialed a number. When the voice on the other end of the line responded, the young fellow inquired as to the possibility of taking care of the lawn during the summer. The woman with whom he was talking assured him that the job was filled and that she had not advertised for such a position. However, the young man pressed further and wanted to know if her present man was satisfactory and was he doing a good job. She assured him that he was quite satisfactory and that she was not at all interested in a change. With that he restored the phone to its place and started to leave the drugstore. The man behind the counter, being a friend of the young man who had made the phone call, spoke to him as he was leaving. He said that he could not help hearing one end of the conversation and he was sorry he did not get the job. "Oh, I already have that job," replied the young fellow, "I was just checking up on myself to see how I was doing."

Not a bad idea for many of us in the realm of financial

stewardship. Measured by our own standards, we do pretty well. But how will we come out when measured by God's standards? These standards are no secret: the law of the tithe still holds, and the gift with the buttons left on and the strings removed is still the one that will bring in the kingdom.

14

Finding Life's Upper Room

(Communion Meditation)

He shall shew you a large upper room furnished: there make ready (Luke 22:12).

The houses in Palestine in the days of Jesus usually had one room, and were flat-roofed. But the house referred to in the text had a second floor—a large upper room. It was here that Jesus told his disciples to go and make ready for the Passover observance. In this large upper room Jesus talked with his disciples, made plans for the future, and above all related himself to his work.

The very mention of the phrase “life’s upper room” denotes retreat from responsibility and escape from the mad rush and the hectic schedule, or a place where we can supposedly “get away from it all” and have peace for a season. But this upper room of Jesus’ cannot be identified with any such evasion of life. Far from being an escape from the hard reality of life, this was the time when Jesus met head-on his task and fulfilled his purpose. The upper room for Jesus was a time when he gained the resource to do his duty and carry out his responsibility.

Perhaps the very detail that this large upper room was in the city and not out in some distant place indicates this was the idea in the mind of the Master. If we labor under the il-

lusion that our meditation and our serious thought is dependent on a physical location, we immediately begin the road to disappointment. For if the Christian feels he must have "surroundings" to produce inner spiritual conditions, he begins by misrepresenting his purpose. The New Testament clearly indicates that the world is not to change the Christian but that the Christian is to change his world. He is to determine his surroundings—not to be determined by his surroundings.

When Jesus shut the door to that upper room, he did not view the hours he would spend there with his close friends as a time of getting away from the noise of the street, the impending doom of Calvary, and the humiliation of arrest, trial, and crucifixion. In these hours he would face in calm reflection that which lay ahead of him; he would examine again in the light of quiet prayer what he was doing, why he was doing it, and where it would lead. This is the kind of upper room that life needs to find in this day and time.

Modern man does not need to get away from life; what he really needs to do is face up to life. So much of our activity is nothing more than escape; we want short cuts, and we desire to side-step and transfer our obligations to another if we can. To this Jesus would say that the way to inner peace is not through escape but rather through doing one's duty, facing one's responsibility. Jesus did not go into retreat when he entered that large upper room; more nearly he undertook the attack!

There is a peace that comes from doing God's will that comes in no other manner. If modern man needs to face anything squarely, it is here that a vision must be entertained. Until God is pleased with our lives, we are out of step. Jesus expressed it pointedly when he said, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?"

The upper room of life is the place of determined direction. It is the place of rethinking the issues of the day. This is not escaping life, it is standing up to life.

Note again that the upper room was not a room of solitude. This runs counter to our generally held conception of what life's upper room is like. If we can only be alone and away from humanity, there we can think and plan and pray. Much truth is in this, but when Jesus came to his trying hour, he did not confine his meditation wholly to the lonely place. The ones with whom he had worked and shared his purpose were the ones he desired on this occasion.

We need this lesson far greater than did Jesus. We are more apt to realize our better nature and better self in the company of those who know us well than we are without them. We can help each other. Christianity is not a solo, it is a chorus. Remember, you cannot have harmony with just a note, there must always be another with whom you can blend. Nobody ever lived a Christian life by himself. An article appeared in a newspaper some years ago with the heading "Bessie Smith Whistles Beethoven's Fifth Symphony." Nobody whistles a symphony, it takes an orchestra. Christianity takes a fellowship of believers, a group bound together by the bond of Christ as Saviour; this is not solitude.

A church I formerly pastored was of Gothic architecture with a corner tower. One of the members suggested that it would be a fine thing if the space in the upper part of that tower could somehow be made into a room for quiet meditation—the upper room in the church! Surely the suggestion had merit, and the need for a place of quiet retreat has its place in the life of the Christian, but that would not be an "upper room" such as the one described here by Jesus. In fact, the real upper room of any church ought to be its sanctuary; the place where Christians gather to share the power

of a fellowship. If we cannot be inspired and lifted in the company of our fellow Christians, we shall not likely rise to new heights when we are all alone. Even when Jesus went into dark Gethsemane, he asked his disciples to stay awake and not lose contact with him in these trying hours.

In the upper room Jesus faced his relationship with the kingdom of God. We might do well to face the same issue. For the Christian it is a question not only of involvement but the degree and extent of that involvement. The answer to that question is where all the answers to life's important questions rest—between us and the Lord. Is my creed convenience or sacrifice? Calvary was certainly not decided on the creed of comfort and convenience.

For the person who has never confessed Christ and followed him in baptism, it is a clear-cut issue. Will I take Jesus as my Saviour and acknowledge him as the New Testament indicates, or will I observe Christianity and Christ with keen interest but without definite commitment? May the bread and the cup of this memorial remind us not only of the atonement that was effected for our redemption but also of the involvement that is necessary for every follower of Jesus. It is in life's upper room that this decision can be faced again and again.

Notes

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