

"CHRISTIAN MATURITY"

TEXT: "We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head,
into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15)

INTRODUCTION There can be little doubt that much of the unhappiness that we encounter as individuals and as families stems from a failure of some adults to grow up. Time and again some wife who has come to talk about the trouble she is having in her marriage sums up the case by saying: "My husband is still just a child in so many ways". To be sure there are some characteristics of childhood which are attractive in children, but when they persist across the years they are like sand in the machinery of human relations.

It is not strange, therefore, that our Christian faith speaks to this need, and so we find the Apostle writing to the members of the church at Ephesus and saying this:

"We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ".

WHAT IT MEANS TO GROW UP Let us get into our truth by noting, first of all, what it means to grow up. In one sense it is easy to grow up. All we need to do is stay around long enough, get enough years under our belt, and we who were boys and girls thirty or forty years ago are now men and women. But you know, of course, that there are plenty of people who are adults physically and yet are children emotionally. The kind of growing up of which we speak is of a more significant sort.

The new translations of the New Testament are a big help in understanding Paul's meaning. There is a phrase in the same paragraph with our text which the King James translators rendered "perfect man". You find it in the sentence which goes like this: "Till we all come in the unity of faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God...unto a perfect man". Another translation makes it read a "full grown man". Then Dr. Phillips comes along and puts it like this: "Until the time comes when, in the unity of common faith and common knowledge of the Son of God, we arrive at real maturity". So that to grow up means to arrive at real maturity.

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA Now that word rang a bell in my mind. It reminded me that a few years ago we were reading a book called The Mature Mind. It was a best seller. It was written by Harry A. Overstreet, one of our better known students of human nature; and when I went back to the book, I discovered that he and Paul were in agreement. Paul tells us that our business is to grow up. Dr. Overstreet puts it like this:

"The business of man is to mature: to mature psychologically, to mature along the line of what is unique in him and what he healthily shares with his fellows, and to continue the maturing process throughout his life".

Furthermore, I found that he has an entire chapter on the "Criteria of Maturity", and he listed certain tests by means of which you can check on your own life and see whether or not you are growing up. The first of these is being unself-centered - "The human being", says Dr. Overstreet, "is born self-centered. One of the most important phrases of maturing is that of growth from self-centering to an understanding of relationship with others....a person is not mature until he has both

an ability and a willingness to see himself as one among others".

A childish jingle goes like this:

"I had a little tea party this afternoon at three,
'Twas very small - three guests in all -
Just I, Myself and Me.
Myself ate up the sandwiches,
While I drank up the tea,
'Twas also I who ate the pie,
And passed the cake to me".

While such self-centeredness is somewhat more normal in children, because they are born that way, yet it is a mark of immaturity in grownups and when you stop to think about what it will do to ruin a friendship and spoil a marriage and mar happiness in later years, you see how important it is to help the child in your home or in yourself to grow out of it. So one of the marks of maturity is unself-centeredness.

A second, according to Dr. Overstreet, is a sense of responsibility. "The human being" he says, "is born irresponsible. He did not choose to enter the human scene; and for a long time after his entrance he is helpless to do anything about it. Yet if we hear a grown man justify his lack of responsible participation in that scene by saying that, after all, he didn't ask to be born, we can set him down as immature".

One of the joys of childhood is the right to be carefree; yet the adult who indulges that freedom too far has failed to grow up: the wife who wishes the advantages of marriage but who resents the work necessary in running a home and rearing a family; the husband who wants a home but who resents the support of the family as an imposition; the college student who accepts the opportunity of an education but rebels against the discipline of study; the citizen who enjoys the freedom of democracy but who will not take the trouble to vote or share in civic enterprises; the church member who considers his duty done when he comes and sits and listens, but refuses to accept assignments in the work of the church or who refuses to accept the responsibilities that go with membership. The playboy who inherits a good living and shirks his share of the world's serious work is well named, for while he may be fifty years old, he is still a boy. One of the marks of maturity, says the man who knows, is a sense of responsibility for doing one's part.

A third mark of maturity, according to the expert, is an integrated life. The word integer means a whole, and to integrate is to bring together into wholeness. "The child" says Dr. Overstreet, "is born to a world of particulars. He has to mature into a world of wholes".

You have noticed, I'm sure, that a child's interest cannot be held by any one thing for long at a time. You give him some blocks to play with and he is fascinated for a while; but before long he is bored with them and wants something else to do. His interest lacks integration. The Apostle mentions this characteristic in the passage which gave us this text. He pleads with his readers in Ephesus that they achieve a mature manhood. "So that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro, and carried about by every wind of doctrine".

One such person of forty years came to my study some time ago. It was about her marriage, she said. She and her husband had not been getting on, and she felt terribly imposed upon. She had talked with her friends. One said this, and one said that, and she was all mixed up. She didn't know whether to leave her husband or try to stick it

out. What she needed to do was to grow up - to get hold of a principle that would tell her what was the right thing to do and then do it, and forget the conflicting advice of different individuals. Her trouble was that, like a child, she was "tossed to and fro", and "carried about by every wind" of advice.

So then there are three criteria of maturity: a life that is grown up will be unself-centered; it will have a sense of responsibility for doing its part; and it will be able to fit together into a whole the various parts of this jigsaw puzzle which is human experience.

GROW UP....INTO CHRIST

Then there is a second truth in our text. Not only does it tell us that we are to grow up, but it suggests the means by which we can achieve our maturity. "We are to grow up" says Paul, "in every way into him who is the head - into Christ". ~~We are talking about the business of helping people grow up.~~ I am convinced that our own happiness as individuals and the well-being of our world depends upon our achieving this maturity. I am further convinced that our Christian faith offers what we need in meeting this goal. As I sit in observation upon my own experience, and as I seek to help those who come to my office for counsel, I am more and more persuaded that the more we grow into Christ, the more we grow into real maturity.

Take, for example, this business of self-centeredness. Our Lord recognized how self-defeating it is for individual happiness and how dangerous it is for the world's well-being. He taught that expansion of the self into other selves ~~which~~ can overcome the dangers of self-centeredness. Granted that self-regard is one of the strongest impulses of our nature. All of us are interested in ourselves and it would be dishonest to deny it. Jesus is altogether levelheaded here. What he says is this: "Love thy neighbor as thyself". Love yourself well, but do not stop there; go on and love your neighbor as you love yourself." "He that findeth his life shall lose it" - begin by centering yourself on yourself and you will end by hating the self you are centered on. A man who is all wrapped up in himself makes a mighty small package, so small in fact that he will be disgusted with it. He that findeth his life shall lose it. And he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."

Here is a six-year old child who was sent to a private school. He had been there only a few weeks when he had a so-called "nervous breakdown". They took him to the doctors and their explanation was that he had been spoiled in his own home, and for the first time in his life he could not be the center of the stage and have things his own way.

~~The same explanation would fit many adult cases. If you are interested in the future well-being of the boys and girls who are growing up in your home; if you are eager that they achieve a healthy mindedness which is a guarantee against going to pieces, then you will see to it that Christ gets hold of them to the extent that they are lifted out of their self-centeredness.~~

Or take this business of a sense of responsibility. I know of nothing better calculated to save a life from being irresponsible than the gospel of Christ. Look once again at the way in which he responded to life. At the age of twelve his parents missed him from their company. When they went to look for him and found him in the temple and began to ask him why he hadn't come along, he said this: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house". And once again, when he started out on his life's business he put it like this: "I am come....not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me". He had a sense of responsibility to a higher will, and when we are willing to learn from him in this regard, we will have the same.

Finally, take this business of a life which is integrated into a wholeness which finds meaning in all the parts. You see how important is this factor when you look at one of the expressions we use to describe a person who is mentally sick; we say that he has "gone to pieces". The reason for his illness is that he lacks an integrating principle which can pull him together and fit the pieces into a pattern which has meaning.

The secret of integration is a purpose which commands and unifies all the interests and energies of your life and there are various kinds of aims and loyalties which have this power. For Napoleon it was personal ambition; you can look at this life and see how it was pulled together and made subservient to this one aim. Yet the purpose which has the greatest power to integrate is to be found in our Christian faith. It is the greatest because it takes in the whole range of human experience. For example, one of the most disintegrating of all things is trouble. Illness lays you low, or physical handicap robs you of your hopes, or death strikes you in your home. You say, "Why should this happen to me?" You shake your fist in the face of heaven, and you are miserable because you cannot fit this fact into your scheme of things, and more and more you go to pieces.

Yet, when you come to think of it, Christ himself was not without trouble. While yet in his thirties his own family thought him crazy, his friends deserted him, and his own nation put him to death. Paul was the same. He had a thorn and the time came when he was beaten with stripes, and stoned to the point of being left for dead. Surely this man had enough trouble to make him go to pieces; but he did not because he was a mature person. This maturity comes from the faith that "all things work together for good", for the only final "good" which is that we conform to the image of the Son of God.

I have been reading the autobiography of Harry Emerson Fosdick. He says that one day he went to see a woman who had gone blind. She had been an active person and blindness would go hard with her. But she had also been a golfer and what she said to Dr. Fosdick was this: "I'm in a sandtrap now; but watch me take my niblick of faith and get out". There was a person who had arrived at real maturity. She did not go to pieces because she had learned to integrate all the facts, even those she did not like, into a wholeness which gave them new meaning.

Here then is your task: as men and women we are to grow up into a real maturity as integrated, responsible, expanding persons. We have at hand in our Christian faith the answer to our need, for we grow up best when we grow up into Christ.

LET US PRAY Open the eyes of our understanding, O God, as we try to interpret thy word to us. Keep our minds clear, our imaginations alive, and our hearts pure and humble, that we may turn to the great Book in which we find thy word, knowing that in it thou wilt somehow speak to us and to our condition.