

"COURAGE - SERENITY - WISDOM"

A Sermon By

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Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
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## "COURAGE - SERENITY - WISDOM"

### INTRODUCTION

Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian and teacher whose name is connected with Union Theological Seminary, used to spend his Summers in Massachusetts. He was often invited to preach at the Sunday service in the little New England Church near his Summer home. One warm July Sunday morning back in 1934, he concluded his sermon with a short prayer he had written. The prayer went something like this:

"O God, give us the courage to change what can be changed;  
the serenity to accept what cannot be changed; and the  
wisdom to distinguish the one from the other...Amen"

After the service was over, a neighbor went up to Dr. Niebuhr and asked him for a copy of the prayer. He took a crumbled piece of paper that he had tucked into his Bible and said, "Take it; it's yours. I shall have no further use for it."

### DEVELOPMENT

Let me tell you what happened with that prayer. The neighbor who asked for it later used it on a Christmas card. The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous saw it and adopted it as the guiding prayer for that fine organization. The USO picked it up and reprinted millions of copies for people in World War II. And by placque and greeting card, by scribbled note and spoken word this prayer has covered thousands of miles and helped many people. It happens to be one of my favorites.

On Tuesday evenings over at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church a group called Neurotics Anonymous has met for a number of years. Here the emphasis is on pouring out emotions for 90 minutes in a circle of people who understand. The motto of this group is:

"O God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot  
change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom  
to know the difference."

A slight modification from the original, but comfort comes, say the members, from the knowledge that you're not alone, that someone else can be as confused and mixed-up and that you can get some serenity from sheer talk with like-minded friends.

### SUMMARY OF THE FAITH

I suppose one of the reasons that this prayer appeals to me is tied in with the fact that it is a clear summary of what the Christian faith is all about. It reflects the insight that every person lives with both freedom and necessity - the freedom to share in some aspects of the creation of his or her own life and society, and the necessity to accept and to adjust to some aspects of his life and the world which do not bend to his or her will.

This, as I understand it, is the Biblical perspective of man. Man is not God, with complete power to do as he will; neither is he an idle, helpless spectator; rather he is in the middle in the whole creative process - creature and yet creative. There are some things he can change and some things he cannot change. It's a truth we see reflected in the life of Jesus. In a very unusual way, He was able to change things and people, but there were also for Him certain immovable circumstances in His life which called for the grace of acceptance.

COURAGE TO CHANGE

Let's think about each of these three petitions in this prayer that is certainly worth committing to memory. And first comes "the courage to change what can be changed."

How much richer in achievement and influence is a person's life when he or she has the will and the courage to press on, to meet life head on, and how much poorer life becomes when a person gives up and stops trying.

Biography's loaded with illustrations of people, who instead of rolling over and giving up when they were knocked down by difficult circumstances found the courage to go on, to change, to keep building. I grew up hearing about the runner, Glenn Cunningham, crippled in boyhood in a school house fire and told by doctors that he would never walk again, determined to use his legs again and going on, in the memory of some of us, to run what was then the fastest mile on record.

Yesterday I stood next to a man from the Road Runners Club over at the park at the mini-Marathon who kept calling to the runners as they went by, "Hey, you're looking good. Everybody's a winner in this race. Keep it up...you're looking good." I liked that, "everybody's a winner."

One thinks of FDR, insisting that he would not be a helpless, useless cripple. In our time, Senator Harold Hughes, convinced that he did not have to spend his days in slavery to alcoholism. And today, hundreds of people in our own city quietly and courageously rebuilding a life after a death or a divorce or an illness. "The courage to change what can be changed.". This, dear friend, is a needed prayer for all of us at some time or other in life, when we come up against a health problem or a family problem or a vocational problem.

I can remember some lines that hung on the wall of my father's study:

"One ship sails East; another West;  
With the self-same winds that blow.  
'Tis the set of the sails - and not the gales -  
That determine the way a ship shall go."

We may not have much to say about the gust of the gales, but we do have something to say about the set of the sails.

And, of course, in wider ways than in our individual lives, the courage to work for change is important. We have all seen in church or community or in the wider world the lifting influences of one person with faith and vision and tenacity. All the way from Moses down to Martin Luther King, the scope of society has been changed by individuals who declined to settle for some status-quo of injustice and oppression. So often we ask, "But what can one person do?" - and shrug our shoulders and give up trying. And therein by abdication and apathy, we can be licked, which is what Edmund Burke had in mind when he wrote that memorable line, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

In contrasting spirit, those wonderful lines of Bonaro Overstreet, entitled, "Stubborn Ounces" come to mind, addressed, as she put it, "to one who doubts the worth of doing anything if you can't do everything." Let me read those lines to you:

"You say the little efforts that I make  
Will do no good; they never will prevail to  
Tip the hovering scale where justice hangs  
in balance. I don't think  
I ever thought they would.  
But I am prejudiced beyond debate  
In favor of my right to choose which side  
Shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight."

We owe a great deal to so many who have gone before us and who surround us now for the way in which they used the "stubborn ounces of their weight". Give us "courage, O God, to change what can be changed."

SERENITY TO ACCEPT But there's more to this prayer, because there's more to life. Grant us, too, O God, "the serenity to accept what cannot be changed.". There are a lot of us who have more trouble with the second part of the prayer than the first part, for we find it difficult to accept emotionally and intellectually the fact that all things will not shape up in accordance with our highest hopes and hardest efforts.

A person comes to realize that he's not going to occupy the top rung in his class, his team, or his business, or society - or, that if he does, there is no tenure at the top!

A person faces the fact of mobility and change of residence in our mobile society. A person comes to face the fact that his children grow up and move out as individuals in their own right, not always according to parental wishes. One person faces the fact of never marrying, and another the fact of a marriage sundered by divorce or by death.

Remember that line from the popular song of yesterday, "So keep on wishing, for wishing will make it so". It may have been beautiful music, but it was a false message for there are some things that no amount of wishing or working for is going to change. Some of the things that no amount of wishing or working for are God-given conditions of our existence. Some of them are boxes that we individually or collectively have worked ourselves in to; some of them are accidents and mysteries that we cannot explain. But whatever the nature of some unbending facts of life, we need to acknowledge that some things are not going to give or change in response to our wills.

John Claypool is a minister of the Southern Baptist Church in Texas. Several years ago, the Claypools lost their young ten year old daughter as a victim of leukemia. Some lines written by Dr. Claypool recently caught my attention and spoke to me and having clipped them, I share them with you.

"If I have learned any lesson at all in these last two years, it has been the agony that is involved in adapting the unalterable. I use to think...somewhat naively...that if a reality was out before me and I knew that it could not be otherwise, that I could bring myself to adjust to it. However, doing this before the fact of my daughter's death has been the

hardest single struggle of my existence. The temptation to prolong the battle through bitterness or escape has been very great and at times I have found it almost unbearable to accept the fact that she is gone and life must now be lived without her. Yet this is the way it is and all the willful arrogance in the world cannot change that fact."

I couldn't help but think as I read those lines of how many version of that situation and that response have been found here in this congregation. There come those times to all of us, when our great need is not sheer will power and determination, but the grace of acceptance, the quiet grace of "adapting the unalterable". And the hopeful, encouraging thing is that here and there about us, like stars shining in the darkened sky, are people in whom that part of the Niebuhr prayer is answered, "O God, grant us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed."

AND THE WISDOM TO KNOW THE DIFFERENCE

And then, finally, the third part of the prayer, "the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other". And this is such a vital part of this little prayer, and remember, too - it is a prayer! It's not a neatly packaged item available to us on the shelf of some nearby drug store. It is a gift!

It is a vision of what comes clearer to us in the practice of prayer, which to me is not just what happens when one consciously prays in solitude or in the sanctuary - but in all the process of listening and responding to that love and that power that surround our being...that rests at the heart of all life.

One day a friend was talking about the art of swimming near his Summer home on the Maine coast. It was near a little inlet that bordered the ocean. At the mouth of this inlet, great turbulence would occur whenever the tide was coming in or going out, and there had been some tragedies because of it. But the natives and the oldtimers in the vicinity knew the secret of coping with it. The point was to let the tide carry a swimmer through the turbulence either in or out of that bay and then he could swim across the current to the shore. Said this friend,

"The trick is knowing when to float, and when to swim, and this knowledge comes from the water itself...."

CONCLUSION

"Knowing when to float and when to swim". Certainly the same thing holds true for life. There is that time for "the courage to change" - that time when the Christian sings and prays affirmatively, "march on, o soul with strength". And there is also that time when he sings and prays, "Be still my soul, the Lord is on thy side" - the time for serenity, the grace of acceptance. And the wisdom to know which and when - such wisdom is ultimately a gift from God, but I also think a person can develop that sensitivity for this distinction as he lives, as he goes through rough waters...and grows in his feeling for and cooperating with that Divine love that will not let us go nor let us down.

"The trick is knowing when to float and went to swim. And this knowledge comes from the water itself...."

SUMMARY Now - just about all that we need is summed up in those three petitions of this prayer, and in the framework of our lives, and the framework of these moments, I would ask you individually to make that prayer your own as we now prepare to depart and return to those places and demands that life has put upon each of us. Let us bow our heads and unite our hearts in prayer:

"O God, grant us the courage to change what can be changed. The serenity to accept what cannot be changed and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen"

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INTRODUCTION Reinhold Niebuhr, the great theologian and teacher, used to spend his summers in Massachusetts. He was often invited to conduct the Sunday Service in the little church near his summer home. One Summer Sunday back in 1934, he concluded his sermon with a short prayer he had written:

"O God, give us the courage to change what can be changed; the serenity to accept what cannot be changed; and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other".

After the service was over, a neighbor went up to Dr. Niebuhr and asked him for a copy of the prayer. He took a crumpled piece of paper that he had tucked into his Bible and said, "Take it; it's yours. I shall have no further use for it".

DEVELOPMENT The neighbor who asked for the prayer later used it on a Christmas card. The founder of Alcoholics Anonymous saw it and adopted it as the guiding prayer for that organization. The USO picked it up and reprinted millions of copies for people in World War II. And by placque and greeting card, by scribbled note and spoken word this prayer has covered many miles and helped many people. Just this past week, after I had determined to preach on this prayer, I called on a person who is a patient in one of the hospitals here in the city, and there on the wall in the entrance way was the prayer:

"O God, give us the courage to change what can be changed; the serenity to accept what cannot be changed; and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other".

SUMMARY OF THE FAITH To me, one of the reasons why this prayer is so appealing is that it is a clear summary of what the Christian faith is all about. It reflects the insight that every person lives with both freedom and necessity - the freedom to share in some aspects of the creation of his own life and society, and the necessity to accept and to adjust to some aspects of his life and world which do not bend to his will.

This, as I understand it, is the Biblical perspective of man. Man is not God, with complete power to do as he will; neither is he an idle, helpless spectator; rather he is in the middle in the whole creative process - creature and yet creative. There are some things he can change and some things he cannot change. We see this truth coming clear in the life of Jesus. In a very unusual way, he was able to change things and people, but there were also for Him certain immovable circumstances in his life which called for the grace of acceptance. Let's think about each of these petitions in this prayer.

COURAGE TO CHANGE First, "The courage to change what can be changed". How much richer in achievement and influence is a person's life when he has the will and the courage to press on, to meet life head on, and how much poorer life becomes when a person gives up and stops trying.

Biography is full of illustrations of people, who instead of rolling over and giving up when they were knocked down by difficult circumstances found the courage to go on, to change, to build. Remember Glenn Cunningham - crippled in boyhood in a schoolhouse fire and told by his doctors that he would never walk again, determining to use his legs again and going on, in the memory of some of us, to run what was then the fastest mile on record. Or Franklin Roosevelt, insisting that he would not be a helpless, useless cripple. In our time, Senator Harold Hughes,

convinced that he did not have to spend his days in slavery to alcoholism. And today, thousands of people in the Wyoming Valley in Pennsylvania quietly and courageously building a new life, after so much that they had was wiped out by the June floods...."the courage to change what can be changed"....this is a needed prayer for all of us at some time or other in life, when we come up against health problems, or family problems, or vocational problems.

I can remember some lines that hung on the wall of my father's study:

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the hovering scale where Justice hangs in balance.  
I don't think  
I ever thought they would.  
But I am prejudiced beyond debate  
in favor of my right to choose which side  
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That's a good phrase - "the stubborn ounces of my weight". We owe a great deal to so many who have gone before us and who surround us now for the way in which they used the "stubborn ounces of their weight". "Give us the courage, O God, to change what can be changed".

SERENITY TO ACCEPT

But there's more to this prayer, because there's more to life. Grant us, too, O Lord, "The serenity to accept what cannot be changed". There are a lot of us who have more trouble with the second part than the first part, for we find it difficult to accept - emotionally and intellectually - the fact that all things will not shape up in accordance with our highest hopes and hardest efforts.

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this inlet, great turbulence would occur whenever the tide was coming in or going out, and there had been some tragedies because of it. But the natives and the old-timers in the vicinity knew the secret of coping with it. The point was to let the tide carry a swimmer through the turbulence either in or out of the bay and then he could swim across the current to the shore. Said this friend, "The trick is knowing when to float and when to swim, and this knowledge comes from the water itself".

"Knowing when to float and when to swim" - I think the same thing holds true for life. There is that time for the "courage to change", that time when the Christian sings and prays affirmatively, "March on, o soul with strength". And there is also that time when he sings and prays "Be still, my soul, the Lord is on thy side" - the time for serenity, the grace of acceptance. And the wisdom to know which and when - this wisdom is ultimately a gift from God, but I also think a person can develop a sensitivity for that distinction as he lives, as he goes through rough waters, and grows in his feeling for and cooperating with that Divine Love that will not let us down or let us go. "The trick is knowing when to float and when to swim, and this knowledge comes from the water itself".

CLOSING Now just about all that we need is summed up in those three petitions of this prayer, and in the framework of our lives and time, I ask you individually to make that prayer your own as we now prepare to depart and to return to those places and those demands that life has put upon each of us. Shall we pray:

"O God, grant us the courage to change what can be changed.  
The serenity to accept what cannot be changed; and the  
wisdom to know the difference". Amen

Neurotics Anonymous meets at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church on Tuesday evenings. Here the emphasis is on pouring out emotions for 90 minutes in a circle of people who "understand." The motto: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can and wisdom to know the difference." Psychiatrists are looked upon with disdain (though some members take professional treatment concurrently with their rap sessions). The comfort comes, say the members, from the knowledge that you're not alone, that someone else can be as crazy or confused, and that you can get same serenity from sheer talk with like-minded friends.