

"JESUS' PRESCRIPTION FOR EYE TROUBLE"

INTRODUCTION

How often do the words of Jesus startle us with insights that we had supposed were the exclusive property of twentieth century wisdom. Take, for example, that section of the Sermon on the Mount that has to do with the way in which we judge other people and quoting from the J. B. Phillips translation:

"You will be judged by the way you criticize others....why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and fail to notice the plank in your own? Take the plank out of your own eye first...."

DEVELOPMENT

Surely we are not to interpret this as an injunction against all critical appraisal in human relationships. Did not Jesus himself once call Herod "that fox", and did he not condemn the Scribes and the Pharisees as "blind guides and whited sepulchres?" Did he not warn his disciples to keep their eyes and their ears open in dealing with people, as he first commissioned them,

"Lo, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves..."

Inevitably we do pass judgments and make criticisms of one another, and a certain amount of judicious appraisal is a basic necessity for survival and significance.

But in these words from the Sermon on the Mount I take it that Jesus was here dealing with that age-old human tendency to minimize our own faults while we magnify the faults of others - to deflect attention from our own sins by denouncing the same sins in others. Psychology has terms for this tendency - terms like "transfer" and "projection" - in either instance meaning to avoid the blame and to shift the responsibility. Jesus never knew the terms, but he knew the tendency, and he described it in that question which is as timely for us as for the first mountain-side congregation who heard his words: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and fail to notice the plank in your own?"

RELATING THIS TO INDIVIDUALS

Suppose we begin by seeing how commonly we reveal this kind of eye trouble as individuals. It's at least as old as Adam, and Adam had it. Remember the story of Adam's transgression in eating the apple from the forbidden tree, and when God asked Adam why he had deliberately disobeyed, Adam did some quick thinking and came up with his defense. "The woman thou gavest me, she gave me the apple..." And of course, we've been doing it ever since - "What did you do with my cuff-links or my glasses or the key to the apartment?" Or in more serious fashion, "See what you've done....to the children... to my job...to the future..." It couldn't be Adam. It couldn't be me.

There's another pretty clear picture of human nature at this point in the Old Testament story of David and Bathsheba and the prophet, Nathan. King David had fallen in love with the wife of his Army Chief of Staff, and so he arranged to kill off the general and marry the widow. He had it all pretty well rationalized until Nathan confronted him with a parable. There was a rich man, the prophet began, who took the one ewe lamb belonging to a poor man. The record has it that "David's anger was greatly kindled against that man..." Whereupon Nathan clamly said, "You are the man". See how indignant David was when he saw his sin revealed in another, but how blind he was to the same sin in himself.

How typical this is. The sins we condemn most roundly in others are sometimes the very sins that we give room to in our own lives. There's an old saying that goes, "It takes a thief to catch a thief". It simply means that we tend to be most sensitive to and censorious of the sins in others that we know something about ourselves. Years ago Dr. Fosdick put it this way:

"We accuse others of the faults and follies we are most tempted to ourselves. The bad-tempered man is always discovering bad temper in others; the debauchee thinks hardly anybody decent; the liar says all men are liars"

One of the simplest ways of avoiding unhappy criticism of our own faults is to discover and denounce similar shortcomings in others.

True, we can carry that truth to absurd extremes, and it does not mean that every time we hear someone find fault or voice a responsible criticism, we should play amateur psychiatry and conclude that the person is transferring or projecting his own shortcoming. But it does mean that when our tendency to criticize and complain becomes chronic, we reveal as much about ourselves as we do the subject of our criticism. How true is the observation of Dr. Tournier, "When we are discontented with ourselves we complain about others".

Remember that old story about the Quaker sitting by a well, approached by a sour-looking individual, who stated he was a newcomer to the area and asked, "What kind of a burg is this?" When the Quaker asked him what sort of town he had come from, the stranger was loud in his complaints. The people, the stores, the church, the local government - everything about the place was wrong. The Quaker responded, "I'm afraid thee will find this the same sort of place". Soon another stranger put the same question to the Quaker, but upon being asked about the town he had come from was generous with his praise. He had largely grateful words. "Well" said the Quaker, "thee'll find this town pretty much the same kind of place". See, then, how amazingly modern and relevant is the word of Jesus, "You will be judged by the way you criticize others". In how many situations, the first responsibility is with ourselves. "Take the plank out of your own eye first, and then you can see clearly enough.."

This would be a strange Sunday morning congregation if there were not some of us to whom this comes home. People out of sorts and unhappy - blaming their predicament on everyone and everything but themselves - the times, their parents, their children, their work, their residence, their neighbors. The teaching of Jesus here is timeless and is only confirmed by modern insights. The road to self-respect and wholeness begins with self-honesty. This is what Jesus was saying not only in our text from the Sermon on the Mount, but in that parable in which he deflated the self-righteous Pharisee, and praised the self-searching publican who could pray, "God be merciful to me - a sinner". That kind of honesty and humility is always the first step to the health and wholeness of life that Jesus came to bring.

RELATING IT TO NATIONS

Come upon another path now and inquire whether the prescription of Jesus for eye trouble does not apply to nations as well as to persons. Do not the nations of the world frequently employ a double standard in which they denounce in other what they excuse in themselves? How easy it is to stir up an emotional reaction against the crimes of other countries, and make that a substitute and diversion for penitence and perseverance in solving a nation's own problems at home. Especially in this country in an election year, how great is the temptation to a mood of national self-righteousness. And how unpopular it would be for any candidate for high office in this country this year to

seriously offer Jesus' prescription, "First look in your own eye...."

When the Russians moved into Czechoslovakia last month, Secretary Rusk reacted strongly to the suggestion of some who wanted to couple a protest over the Russian invasion with a concern for our own involvement in Vietnam. He termed that viewpoint "Moral myopia". "Myopia" the dictionary says is really "eye trouble" - a condition "resulting in defective vision". And this is what Jesus was talking about in our text this morning, but there is a difference. The Secretary of State was concerned lest we become so contrite about ourselves that we fail to see clearly the crime being perpetrated in Europe. Jesus was concerned lest we become so preoccupied with the sins of others that we fail to recognize our own sins. There is a valid point in either concern, but which do you think really represents the greatest temptation to America today?

That Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia is a major tragedy of our time. Anyway you look at it it is a loss. Loss for the Czech people in their stretch toward freedom. Loss for the Russians in their developing an image of responsibility and tolerance. Loss for the world's hopes for arms control and peaceful negotiation. But one of the subtle casualties may be distinctively America's loss. For it is easy for us to find a scapegoat, which enables us to cry out against the crimes of Communism, while we become complacent and even self-righteous about our own state of affairs.

What was it Ralph Waldo Emerson said a century ago:

"Your American eagle is very well, protect it here and abroad.
But beware of the American peacock"

It's that preening and priding ourselves that gets in the way of national honesty and humility. It is in no way to detract from gratitude for a glorious heritage or for present freedoms, when we acknowledge, if not planks, at least some sizeable specks of sawdust in our national vision. There is a war, the course and cost of which troubles the consciences of millions. There are pockets of poverty with hunger and great despair. There is racism - militant among extremists of both races - subtle in so many of us. There is the virus of violence, as we have witnessed the assassination of three leaders and the riots and spiralling crime rates in our communities. There is a reliance upon alcohol and drugs that turns people from free men to slaves. There is a moral wilderness in which greed and deceit and sensuality seem much more in evidence than service and truth and unselfish love.

Let us be clear about this. The Christian Church's message involves no soft mitigation of judgment on the crimes of Communism and especially on the latest blows at freedom and human dignity. But the distinctive message of the Christian Church first focuses attention upon ourselves, asks us to do some soul-searching, calls us to repentance and acceptance of responsibility. You are not apt to hear much of that in the political forum but you ought to hear something of it in Christ's Church, for without some honest humility about ourselves, there is not much solid hope for our world.

Once during a war-time debate in the House of Commons in London, one member made grateful reference to the Sermon on the Mount. At which an opposition member took offense and thundered, "God help the British Empire if it must be defended by the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount". Well, God help Britain - or America - or any other nation, if it forgets the Sermon on the Mount, including that injunction, "First look in your own eye." The pages of history contain the faded reminders of predecessor

world powers that forgot all about anything vaguely related to the Sermon on the Mount, as drunk with power and bloated with pride, they wrote their own death sentence. It is presumptuous folly to suppose that could not happen to America.

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Sometimes when I join in singing, "God Bless America", I wonder just what it is that we are singing and asking. Are we beseeching God to preserve the status quo, to bless and keep everything just as it is? Or are we really asking God to guide us - to bring us to repentance - to correct us - to use America, not for our glory but for his. There's another national hymn that spells it out much more clearly from the religious standpoint:

"America, America, God mend thine every flaw,
Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in
law".

The sermon ends as it started, with grateful wonderment that God's man in Galilee, could so clearly prescribe for the eye-trouble that still afflicts persons and nations, "You will be judged by the way you criticize others.....first, look in your own eye".

PRAYER O, God, make us honest - and from that lead us to self-respect, but never to self-righteousness, alike as persons and as a nation. So we pray, because of Jesus and his words to us. Amen

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One is mindful of the words of Martin Luther King:

"No individual can live alone, no nation can live alone, and anyone who feels that he can live alone is sleeping through a revolution. The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood.

We must all learn to live together as brothers. Or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an escapable network of mutuality. And whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly"