

## "LEARNING TO OVERCOME"

I heard a story recently about a minister in a small Kentucky town who one Sunday morning asked everyone in his congregation that wanted to go to heaven to stand up and be counted. Everyone in the congregation, except one elderly gentleman, stood up to be counted. The minister then asked all those who wanted to go to hell to stand up. Nobody stood up. The minister, somewhat puzzled and perplexed, looked down at the non-cooperative brother and asked him just where it was that he wanted to go. The man looked up at him and said: "Preacher.....I don't want to go anywhere. I'm happy right where I am."

That's all there is to the story. It simply serves to remind us that there are some people who are happy where they are, people who are content with what they're doing. But on the other hand, if you'll allow me to stretch the story, it also serves to remind us that there are many people who are not happy where they are, people who are not content with what they're doing. Now I don't know what your experiences tell you, but mine tell me this that there are scores and scores of people who are not happy over the circumstances surrounding their living. They'd like to be in some other place. They'd like to be doing something other than what they're doing. But apparently life has squeezed and hedged them into a tight corner from which they can not escape. Such people perhaps need to develop what I would like to call the "Art of Overcoming the World".

To begin with, we need to remember that Jesus lived in a dark and discouraging spot on earth. We remember that he lived on the fringe of a great empire, far removed from the center of life and culture. And further more he lived there at a very dark and discouraging time in history. Certainly the circumstances surrounding his living were far from being ideal. Certainly there were few opportunities for growth and happiness. And yet, in this restricted situation, Jesus learned the art of overcoming the world. And the thing that impresses me the most is that he didn't use one of our devices to do so. He didn't try to get rich. He didn't shirk responsibility. He didn't run away from a situation. He didn't escape through pleasure and through idleness. But rather he overcame the world from within. He mastered its difficulties and its limitations by first mastering his own mind and heart with the power of God. And then his world became a glorious spot. He overcame the world from within. And we can do the same. There's great truth in those words written by John Homer Miller:

"Your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens. Circumstances and situations do color life, but you have been given the mind to choose what the color shall be."

Yes, we have the power to overcome the world. We can choose the color of life. Suppose then, with these few thoughts as a background, suppose we consider several techniques involved in overcoming the world.

WE MUST BE WILLING  
TO FACE THE WORLD!

Now if we're really serious in our attempt to overcome the world, if we really desire to master life, then first of all we must be willing to face the world. I think it was this type of thing that Tennyson had in mind when he said:

"He faced the specters of his mind and laid them.  
Thus at length, he came to find a stronger faith  
his own."

We must be willing to face the world. We must be willing to submit ourselves to some honest soul searching and discipline. We must examine our motives. We must be willing to face others with patience and with understanding. It doesn't do us any good to run away from life. We never overcome life by doing this.

There's an old fable that bears frequent repeating. Some of you may be familiar with it. It's the story of two brothers who became thieves. One dark night they stole two sheep belonging to a neighboring farmer. But a few days later, they were caught, they were tried and they were convicted. Now it seems to have been the custom in those days to brand evil men with a sign of their guilt. And so the two brothers were branded on the forehead with the letters ST, meaning or standing for "Sheep Thief". One brother could not bear to face his friends with such a brand and so he left home and settled in another land under a different name. But you know how people are, they're always asking questions, and they were extremely curious about the strange markings on his forehead. When his answers became evasive, they made inquiry and found out the truth. And this brother would make his way to another land where the same thing was repeated. In this way he kept moving from place to place, always among strangers, always in strange places. Eventually he died, without peace, and without friends. But the other brother decided to stay at home. It was difficult. But he got a job, lived honestly and quietly. He helped the needy and the afflicted in the town in order to pay for his misdeed. It's funny, but soon the people began to forget what he had done, and after a while they didn't even notice the strange letters on his forehead. But then one day a stranger came to town and saw the strange markings on the forehead of this brother, and he asked a native of the village what they stood for. The native replied, "Why it happened so long ago, I've forgotten the details. But it seems to me that those letters ST stood for Saint".

It's a parable of life. We never overcome the world, we never master life by running away from it. Sometimes the problem is with ourselves. If you're like I am you don't like to be reminded of this, but I think that we'd have to agree that there's an element of truth in this. We think we're getting rid of a problem when we leave it behind, but nine times out of ten, the problem comes right along with us because basically the problem is with ourselves. If we hope to master life, we must be willing to face ourselves honestly and examine our motives. Sometimes we have trouble getting along with other people. You know we human beings can be such fault finders. If a person doesn't always fit into our own pattern of living, we get provoked, and disturbed, and lose our patience. We're so quick to offer advice, and sometimes so reluctant to take it ourselves. I think that all of us can do a better job of getting along with

others by being willing to face them honestly and frankly, by being willing to accept them for what they are, by being more understanding, and above all to love them as brothers.

I think this too that when we confront a situation with the spirit of Jesus, we in a sense become superior to that situation. And it really doesn't matter what the situation is either. I know it's not easy, but it's my conviction that life can be met and mastered. It may be that some of you are struggling through some difficult situations, and you may feel that you're fighting the battle alone. When you're tempted to feel this way, just remember that a lot of others are struggling too, and even though it may sound oversimplified, and perhaps beyond your comprehension and understanding, God is standing along side of you in that battle! We're reminded of those words spoken by George Bernard Shaw's Saint Joan as she faced the selfish court of France:

"There is no help, no counsel in any of you. Yes, I am alone on earth. I have always been alone. France is alone; and God is alone, and what is my loneliness before the loneliness of my country and my God?.....I see now that the loneliness of God is his strength. Well my loneliness shall be my strength too. It is better to be alone with God. His friendship will not fail me, nor his counsel, nor His love. In his strength, will I dare and dare and dare until I die!"

With this kind of God supported courage we can face life and overcome the circumstances of our living. Someone once remarked that there are two kinds of cowards: one kind always lives with himself, afraid to face the world. The other kind always lives with the world, afraid to face himself. I don't know how you feel about this, but my feeling is that if a person is to overcome the world and really master life, then he must have the courage to face God, face himself, and face others with integrity, with honesty and with understanding.

BY INTERPRETING IT WITH  
IMAGINATION AND SPIRITUAL  
INSIGHT

In the second place, if we are to overcome the world, then we must learn to interpret it with imagination and with spiritual insight.

Last Sunday evening at our Family Night Supper we saw some lovely colored slides of Japan. Our speaker showed us a picture of the Imperial Hotel in Japan (Toyko). I don't know if you're familiar with this building, but there are some interesting facts which are worthy of our attention. To begin with the building was designed by Frank Lloyd Wright so as to withstand earthquakes and earth tremors. The weight of the floors is not carried by the outer walls, but by central supports. These central supports balance the floors in much the same fashion that a waiter balances a tray on his hand. It's an architectural feat. During the earthquake of 1923, the buildings in the vicinity of the hotel were shaken and crumbled to the earth. The hotel rocked with the upheaval, but when the earthquake passed, the building settled back into its position without a crack or dislocation to tell the story.

And so it is if we hope to overcome the world, we will have to learn how to outwit it. And I think we can do this by placing our support on the hidden, eternal spiritual values which are at the very

heart and center of life. If we get the center right the circumference will take care of itself. This will give us a sense of detachment from the disturbing tremors of life. We need to hold on to the spiritual insight which sees that the goodness and the love of God are the central supports of life. And when we begin to build our lives on this kind of a foundation, nothing, nothing at all, not even earthquakes and tremors will shake us. It's God's world and when his spirit gets hold of a person and penetrates his thinking and his living then great things begin to happen. Darkness can be transformed into light. Sorrow into joy, and tragedy into triumph.

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OVERCOMING  
THE WORLD RESTS WITH EACH INDIVIDUAL.

Finally, I would just like to suggest that the responsibility for overcoming the

world rests with each individual. That is to say, that no one can master life for you. You have to do it yourself. You have been given a mind to choose the color of life. And you have been given the strength and the power to do this.

I'd like to close with a story about an elderly man, who by the purity of his heart and the practical wisdom of his years, gained the reputation for being something of a prophet and a saint in his own community. On one occasion, however, this beloved old gentleman was the subject of an attempted hoax by a young smart aleck living in the village. The young man thought he had discovered a way to expose the man thus destroying his reputation as a prophet. He planned to hold a little bird enclosed in his half clenched fist with its beak protruding between his forefinger and his thumb. He would then ask the old man what was in his hand. He would probably answer, "A bird" He would then ask the man if the bird was dead or alive. And if he answered dead, he would open his hand and the bird would fly out. And if he said alive, he would simply crush the bird with his hand, killing it, and would then drop the quivering body of the bird to the ground. In either case the old prophet would be discredited.

The young man passed the word around the village that he was going to unmask the supposed saint. The people gathered around, somewhat afraid for their beloved sage. The young man held the bird in his half clenched fist, and said to the old man, "Old man... tell me, what do I have here" "A bird" replied the man. "Old man, is this bird dead or is it alive. Tell me!" The old man stood there thinking, and then all of a sudden he saw the trap. His face hardened, and a smile of sadness and pity came across his face. "You ask me whether the bird is alive or dead. As you will, my son, so shall it be."

"As you will, so shall it be". Wonderful words to carry with us. Do you "Will" to overcome the world? Do you "Will" to master life? The choice is there before us. We can conquer the circumstances of our living if we really want to. First, however, we must be willing to face the world, and this involves facing God, ourselves, and others in complete honesty. It involves interpreting the world with spiritual insight and imagination. But the responsibility for doing this rests entirely with you. No one can do it for you. For "As you will, so shall it be!"

LET US PRAY: Our Father, in these moments of quietness, reassure us that with thee all things are possible. With thy help we can overcome the world. Accept these thoughts. Purify them of their imperfections, and may we by them be led to a greater understanding of Thee, of ourselves, and of life! Amen