

"LIVING WITH LITTLE THINGS"

Several years ago, during the early hours of the historic World Security Conference in San Francisco, the commentators reporting this event to the rest of the world were suddenly cut off the air. An immediate investigation revealed that there was no evil conspiracy involved, but that the trouble had been caused by a farmer driving a truck-load of fertilizer in Colorado, fourteen hundred miles from the Conference. It seems that the farmer lost control of the truck with the result that it crashed into a telephone pole, knocking it over and snapping the wires of the radio net-work. And so the interests of the entire nation in the efforts for world peace were held up because of an accident to a truck load of fertilizer fourteen hundred miles from the Conference Room.

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The story serves to remind us that oftentimes small, seemingly insignificant things cause results far out of proportion to their actual size. This idea finds frequent illustration in life. Thomas Jefferson, as an old man, told about the final signing of the Declaration of Independence. He said that most of the members intended to debate the matter at length before signing. The day set for debate was very hot and humid. Moreover, through the open doors of the Philadelphia State-house came a swarm of flies from a near-by stable. The flies made for the silk-stockinged legs of the delegates, and in the confusion that followed all thought of debate was forgotten. The members of the Conference, pestered by the flies, hurriedly signed their names to the document which was to set up a new nation in America. Little things often cause results out of proportion to their actual size.

All of this helps to introduce us to the fact that small, seemingly inconsequential and insignificant things play a part in our personal living. I think that most of us have little trouble in subscribing to the larger ideals and basic beliefs of Christian living. We know them and we have no quarrel with them. We take pride in our belief in God, and in our devotion to the concept of world brotherhood. We have faith in truth, and faith in love as a way of life. Likewise, we brace ourselves against the major enemies of life. We build hospitals, we carry insurance, we take vitamins, we dig bomb-shelters. Likewise, we create armies, support police forces, and campaign against sin and communism.

The difficulty is, however, that life is undermined, gnawed at, and weakened little by little by the unseen and unseeable. Yes, we stand up well against the larger issues of life, only to fall prey to the seemingly harmless enemies that attack us and take away our strength. It's not the bomber attack, but the bacillus invasion that we need to watch out for - the careless criticism, the sharp sting of gossip, the prickly irritations, the lustful imagination, the secret hate, the hidden jealousy, the white lie, the borrowed money, the innocent philandering, the terrible temper, and the strain of worry and over-work. These are the things that we should be concerned with. Often behind the pious fronts with which we face the world, these tiny microbes and germs filter into our lives and lay waste our strength of character. These little things do at least three things to us.

FIRST: THEY INJURE PERSONALITY AND DESTROY THE EFFECTIVENESS OF OUR CHARACTER. THEY FESTEER AND BREED TROUBLE FOR US.

There's an old legend from Arabia in which the devil presents himself to a man and said, "You are about to die. You can save yourself from death in any one of three ways - kill your servant, beat your wife, or drink this cup of wine." The man thought for a moment and then said: "To kill my faithful servant is wrong. To beat my wife is ridiculous. Therefore, I shall drink the cup of wine." The legend tells us that the man became drunk, and while drunk, he beat his wife and killed the faithful servant who was trying to protect her. The thought behind this old legend is this: we seldom break at our strongest points. We are betrayed in our weakest moments. In other words, one small defective trait in a personality often cancels or discounts much that is fine and good. The effectiveness of character may be destroyed by a little careless criticism, innocent philandering, or a wagging tongue.

SECOND: SMALL ISSUES OFTEN MAKE US INSENSITIVE TO THE TRUER VALUES OF LIFE. Let me illustrate this idea by giving you an example.

There's a story of a certain Mr. Bouncer, an American cereal manufacturer, who offered a million dollars to the Pope in return for a favor. The Pope refused. One of the Cardinals objected, saying that the million dollars could do a great deal of good. He asked the Pope why he had refused. The Pope said that Mr. Bouncer had asked him to change two words in the Lord's Prayer. Instead of, "Give us this day our daily bread", he wanted it to be, "Give us this day our Bouncer's wheat flakes"

The point here is this - that when we become so preoccupied with wheat flakes, or their equivalent, with small insignificant things, we're liable to miss many of the more important things in life. Small issues often make us insensitive to the more important values of life.

THIRD: THE LITTLE THINGS OF LIFE CAN TAKE OUR ATTENTION AWAY FROM THE WIDER CONCERNS AND ISSUES OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

Joseph Fort Newton told about a man who was opposed to a merger of his church with another church. One evening at a church dinner, the objector was talking to a friend sitting next to him. Watching the ladies serving their specialty, delicious hot buns, he said to his friend: "You know, if this merger goes through, we'll never see those ladies serving those delicious hot buns!" I don't know if the church merger ever went through. That's not the main idea. Too often when it's a choice between hot buns or brotherhood, the buns win out. The almighty dollar, just like the hot buns, can be a real enemy of society. Such important issues as human brotherhood, the Christian home, and a democratic society are often discounted by such little things as the careless word spoken in anger, the unkind act, the whisky bottle, and the moment of passion.

Little things can cause some pretty big headaches. They can injure personality and destroy the effectiveness of our character. They often make us insensitive to the truer values of life. And they can take our attention away from the wider concerns and issues of life. We've seen what little things can do to us, now let's consider three ways we may meet and master the menace of the minute.

ONE SUGGESTION is that we constantly take time out to renew the life within.

Most of us do not deliberately set out to deny God, or develop unruly habits. In the hustle and hurry of life, we drop our guard. We forget to pray. We overlook the niceties of good human relations. We become careless in our habits. We become so immersed in the secular that we become indifferent to the things of the spirit. It's when our bodies and our souls become tired, weary and weak that we're open to an attack by the small irritations of life. When we are emotionally, physically, and spiritually stable and healthy, we throw off the germs of the soul. Those who live on the surface of the life are most likely to be victims of its pettiness. Little things can't hurt us unless we let them. Times of rest and prayer are essential to our well being. The poet has expressed it in these words:

"Too close life crowds. There is no place to hide.
From feverish days my heart throbs in my side;
Let us take time, take time;
Let us take time to know the thoughts of men;
Time to know beauty; and time to feel again
Calm and content of soul - the quiet power
Of meditation through a gentle hour
Spent with God.
Time for books, the song, the golden weather
Made for happiness of friends together;
Time to believe; and time to lift the bars
Twixt us and truth, twixt heart beat and the stars
Before our breath is spent, before life's mill
Grinds all too fine. Let us this hour be still
And know our God.
Let us take time. Take time."

A SECOND SUGGESTION for learning how to live with little things is to cultivate a sense of proportion that tells us which little things are important and which are unimportant.

We need to know that when we take care of the little things that are important, the big things take care of themselves.

Charles Spurgeon told one time of a famous tailor who was about to die. His associates asked him to tell the secret of his success in the tailoring business before he passed away. He agreed to do so. At the appointed hour a large number of his tailoring associates gathered in his room to hear what he would say. In a solemn voice, he gave them this infallible rule for success in these words:

"Always put a knot in your thread....."

It was his way of saying that the bigger successes in life are dependent on attention to small details. One has to build on small, sure foundation stones. Many lives of great capacity and promise have been wrecked because in pursuing larger goals, man overlooked small habits and practices that tend to destroy. And many a marriage has been shipwrecked not because of lack of intelligence or fidelity, but because of sharp tongues or neglected courtesy. When we are honest, kind, and considerate and pure in small matters, we needn't worry about success, reputation and happiness. They're ours already!

A THIRD SUGGESTION for learning how to live with little things finds expression in these words: we need by the grace of God to live above and beyond the trifling irritations of life.

The little things that are important we need to respect and use. The little things that are vicious in nature we need to avoid and fight. If we don't, they'll tear us to bits and destroy our happiness and our peace of mind. Unless we learn to sidestep them one by one as they appear, they are likely to balloon into major problems too hard to handle.

Let me tell you what I mean by telling you a story about a blacksmith. A blacksmith offered to shoe a horse for a customer on the basis of 1¢ for the first nail, 2¢ for the second nail, 4¢ for the third nail, 8¢ for the fourth nail, and so on..... The owner of the horse, unfamiliar with compound doubling, accepted the bargain. And so for eight nails in each shoe, or a total of thirty-two nails, the bill came to \$42,949,672.95! And so it is that many trivial fears, worries, and quarrels multiply rapidly and present us before we know it with bills that we cannot pay.

We worry about so many things in life that are unimportant. It amazes me the things that people worry about and lose sleep over. Really - it's a sin! Some where along the line we have gotten the idea that we're so important that unless we get this thing done or tend to that small item, that the world is going to fall down. I'm reminded of the advice a TV director gave to some young actors. Often he would caution them against emphasizing an unimportant sentence or idea. "Throw it away" he would say, "Don't make a thing of it." There are so many unimportant issues and ideas that we try to "make a thing of" when we ought to "throw them away". Suppose you don't like what someone said: throw it away! Suppose you have to do something you don't want to do. Don't make a thing of it. Suppose you don't like the color of your husband's necktie - be nonchalant - throw it away. (Not the tie, but the criticism). Suppose the toast is burned. Don't let it spoil your day. Life's far too wonderful to be spoiled by fussing over little matters that don't count.

The supreme example of balance and proportion in the treatment of little things of life is, of course, the man from Galilee. Jesus himself knew the importance of little things: candles, coins, mustard seeds. BUT Jesus was always telling his followers not to lose themselves in quibbling over the details of insignificant matters. We know that Jesus remained poised and serene in the face of the nagging cross currents of criticism and opposition. He did so because he lived his life close to God. It was this divine perspective that put everything in its proper place and helped him to avoid the pitfalls of the picayune.

And so when we venture to live close to God and share something of this vision and this outlook, then we too shall be lifted beyond the reach of the petty frustrations of life and we too shall avoid the pitfalls of the picayune. With God's power, we resist the little things that are dangerous. With God's help we sidestep the little things that are insignificant. With God's wisdom we respect and we use the little things that are important. This is the art of living with little things!

LET US PRAY:

Our Father and our God, may we carry the inspiration of this hour into our daily living. Help us to be concerned with the little things that are important. Help us to rise above the small irritations that are not important, and give to us the wisdom to see the difference between the important and the unimportant. This we ask in thy name, Amen.