

MORE LIKE A CHRISTIAN

INTRODUCTION

Whenever the subject of the current revival of religion comes up, the first question that is likely to be asked, particularly if there is a minister present, is HOW DO YOU ACCOUNT FOR IT? Last Sunday morning we considered that question in some detail, and those of you who were here will recall that I tried to set before you the answer which to my way of thinking comes the closest to the facts. I suggested that this current revival of religion that has taken place in our country over the past five to ten years simply points to the deep hunger that exists in human hearts for SECURITY, MEANING, and the ANSWERS to many of life's ultimate questions. People are reaching out for these things, and searching for them today within the walls of the Christian community. A man can exist for some time below the surface of the water, but sooner or later he must come up for air. And by the same token, a person can exist for a while submerged in the material world, but sooner or later he too must come up for air, else he shall suffocate. And I think he is coming up for air at the present time, for the kind of air, that is, that is essential in order for his life to have security and meaning.

Now there is another question that is usually raised in connection with this subject, namely this: IS THIS REVIVAL THE REAL THING? Is it soul deep, or simply skin deep. To put it in more specific terms, are people behaving more like Christians today than they did before the revival began. In other words, is the renewed interest and activity in the life of the church producing the fruits of Christian behavior, or is it simply soothing shattered nerves, and coddling the minds of people who are too weak to take the shocks of life?

Before we try to answer that question perhaps it would be well for us to get a clearer picture in mind as to what constitutes Christian behavior. HOW do you spot a Christian in the crowd? WHAT makes a Christian different in his behavior from those around him? If you were to draw up a list of three or four things which you thought were typical of distinctive Christian behavior, what would you include on your list. Certainly the list would be interesting, and each list would reflect the person who wrote it to be sure. I think it would be best to eliminate at the very beginning such things from our list as going to church, and saying our prayers, because we take these things for granted as the normal activity of any Christian. What we would want to indicate by our list would be the things that this kind of religious activity might be expected to produce - the attitudes, the qualities that are the natural result of such religious belief and practice. Some of you may suspect by now that I have made such a list. I should not want anyone here this morning to think that I am suggesting this as a complete picture of Christian character. It isn't by any means. But these are the things which to me are most noticeable in Christian behavior, things which I would like to cultivate within myself.

THERE IS A QUIETNESS

To begin with, there is a quietness about a Christian that you cannot miss. What I mean is that the real Christian is less jittery than other people, and more at peace with himself, his world, and his God. He's less anxious, less fretful, less fearful of the future than the rank and file of people that he lives with. There's a quietness, a serenity, a contentment about a Christian that you cannot miss.

This sense of quietness comes from having confidence in God. It is a willingness to trust the resources that are beyond your own, and a certainty that after you have done your best, there is another who will carry forward what you have begun, supplementing your inadequate efforts and correcting your mistakes. It is the sense that while everything depends on you, nothing depends on you. And therefore, there is a stillness about Christians that is like the stillness of water that runs deep.

You see it, of course, in the way that they behave, in the way that they take disappointment, in the way that they tackle difficulties and heavy responsibilities, in the way that they accept their losses. They do it quietly, knowing that everything does not rest upon them, but that they rest upon God, not leaving God to do the things that they ought to do, but realizing that there is a strength and a power beyond them that will lift them up and give them the power to do what they have to do. Jesus, of course, had it to a superlative degree. In the Garden of Gethsemane, for instance, when all was confusion and his best friend led the soldiers who came to arrest him, and mocked him with a kiss, Jesus said quietly: "Judas, my friend, what are you doing here?" This, I think is the kind of quietness that is characteristic of Christian behavior at its best. It is the quietness that is the fruit of faith and confidence in the ways of God.

THERE IS AN UNWORLDLINESS

In the second place there is an unworl'dliness about a Christian that is very noticeable, particularly in our society that is worldly and materialistic. Don't misinterpret what I'm going to say in connection with this point. The Christian ought not to renounce the world and everything in it as something that is evil and bad. I don't want anyone to go out of here this morning with the impression that I'm suggesting that we ought to renounce the world in the same fashion that the monks of the dark ages renounced it going off to live in monasteries. Not that. The Christian loves the world. He loves the world because God made it, and he loves the world the way that a parent loves a child. This perhaps isn't the best analogy but it may help to convey some of the meaning behind all of this. A parent loves his child from head to toe, every inch of him, and yet there may be some things about the child that the parent doesn't love so much. If the child has a hasty temper, he doesn't like that. If the child has an unruly selfish streak, he doesn't like that. To be sure, he loves some things about the child more than others. He loves the beauty of the child and takes great delight in seeing the child grow and develop, but if something suddenly were to deface the child or disfigure him, the parent would not stop loving the child because he was less beautiful. He loves something in the child that is over and above and beyond the beauty of the child. This to me, suggests the way that the Christian ought to regard the world and the things within it.

Take food, for instance, the Christian enjoys the food on his table, but he doesn't live to eat; he eats to live. Take money, for instance, he makes money in order to live, but he doesn't live for the money he makes. His behavior again and again reflects this in specific and practical ways. For instance, suppose you had a daughter and she was about to get married, and you were about to meet him for the first time, would your judgment of him rest upon what he has financially or who his grandparents were, or what schools he went to,

or would your judgment of him rest upon what he is as a person. It may sound commonplace to some of you as I say it, and yet mind you, there are many parents today who have been on the verge of such a judgment, thinking more in terms of what a young man has, rather than what he is. His decision about a job reflects the same sort of thing. A Christian has to have a job that pays enough to keep his family alive, but his ultimate decision about a job is based not so much on what he will make but upon the opportunities the job provides him with to contribute something useful to society. His way of life is simple, though not bare, and I am not implying that all Christians ought to live in cell-like rooms without any of the luxuries of life. I for one hope we never come to that. I should not enjoy it. To sum things up: God has put many things into our world for us to use and enjoy, but at the same time he wants us to be discriminating in the way that we use these things. He doesn't want us to be so attached to them and so smothered by them that we lose our awareness of the things that other people need. He wants us to have the kind of freedom from the things of the world that Jesus had who traveled through life unencumbered by the things that so often can weigh us down. This is the kind of unworldliness that we look for in Christian behavior.

THERE IS A GENTLENESS

Third, there is a gentleness about a Christian that stands out. He is gentle with others, not because he is weak, not because he doesn't care one way or another, but because he is so strong and cares so much for another's life that he would rather die than violate it, crush it, or cause it to suffer. He believes that there is something stronger than physical force to bring about the things that he wants to bring about for the people that he knows and cares and loves. He believes, on the basis of personal experience, that love can do things that nothing else can do. Now, this doesn't mean that he never uses force under any circumstances. There are times when all of us need a good swift kick in order to get things done. It does mean that he has learned from his own personal experience that you can fight your way through a crowd, but that you can never fight your way into the life of another person. You can only win your way. He is not the kind of person who puts on pressure, who is high-powered, and quick to resort to temper and force and violence. He is the sort of person who tries to cultivate within himself the kind of gentleness that Jesus had, Jesus - the strong son of God, who attracted strong but gentle men to follow him.

KIND OF PERSON YOU LIKE TO HAVE AROUND

The last thing on my list is perhaps harder to put into words, and I'm not at all sure whether I have chosen the best words to express what I mean. I have put it this way. A Christian is the kind of person that other people like to have around, not just because he is fun at a party and gives everyone a good time, although to be sure, such people have their place. No....people want this kind of person around because he quickens them. He brings out the best in people. They are more alive when he's there. He draws them out of themselves. He draws things out of themselves that they didn't know they had. He communicates to them some of his own extraordinary vitality. He enjoys life. He's interested in others. He lifts their lives. So I would say without any hesitation that if you're trying to spot a Christian and you see someone who is glum and grim, and sour looking, casting a cold blanket on others, you can be sure of this: he hasn't got it.

AND IN CONCLUSION

There is a quietness about the Christian; there is an unworldliness about the Christian; there is a gentleness about a Christian. All of these taken together, make him the kind of person that you like to have around. This now brings us back around to our original question: Are people behaving more like Christians today than they did before this revival began. Personally I hesitate to make any general statement. But I have my doubts. I can see no great wave of Christian behavior and moral perfection sweeping across our land, although I see it time and again in individuals. Some clergy complain that they get discouraged in their ministry, that they preach and teach and give a great deal of themselves to their people, and yet see nothing happening in the lives of their people. I am thankful that my experience has not been like that. I have seen people in this congregation come alive, and I hope and expect that in the days ahead I shall see even more of it. But as I look across our land, I don't see that people are less materialistic or less violent or less selfish than they once were. And one of the things that often puzzles me is this that I often see the characteristics of distinctive Christian behavior in people who have no close connection with Christianity, and I fail to find them in the people who profess to be the most devout and loyal Christians. I shall not go into this at this time, but leave it for you to think about.

In closing let me say this that it's not for you or for me to make such judgments about other people. The only one that we have to answer for is ourself. And I'm going to put this question to you as plainly as I can, and ask you now in the quietness of this place to think about it, not in reference to somebody else, but in reference to yourself. ARE you less anxious, less jittery, any quieter because of greater confidence in God, than you were a year ago? ARE you less worldly, less materialistic, in the sense of being more detached from the things of the world and freer to think and act in the world of the spirit that you were a year ago? ARE you more gentle in the sense that you have under control your hostilities, your prejudices and your temper? ARE you any less violent in your attitudes and your actions than you were a year ago, more confident that love always wins?

Just two things briefly to help you answer these questions. First, your relationship with God, thank heavens, doesn't depend on the score that you make. God accepts you even though your score may be a zero. Don't be afraid and discouraged. On the other hand, if your relationship with God is what it ought to be, you should be improving from year to year. And the second thing is this: you cannot do it by yourself. You cannot improve simply by trying harder. You can do it only when and if God comes to you, as he will come in many ways, in ways that you least expect. He may come through the inspiration that comes from another person who crosses your path, or from the flashes that come from a book as you read, or from the insights that come from an experience which may cause you to plow the depths, or from an experience such as this as you sit quietly Sunday after Sunday in church. But in it all and through it all, if you are ready to receive this coming of God's spirit, you will improve and you will behave more like a Christian as the years go by.

PRAYER: Our Father and our God, thou hast shown us the perfect life in the life of thy Son. Help us as we are drawn to that unattainable ideal. Save us from discouragement, and give us the strength and wisdom to go steadily on our way, cultivating the qualities we admire that are part of distinctive Christian behavior. We ask this because we love him, admire him, and want to be like him...Jesus Christ our Lord.

Very pleased to have this opportunity to share in the fellowship of your Christian family here at 150 Fifth Avenue, and to have a part in your week-day worship experience.....