

"NO MORE 'SOUR GRAPES'"

A Sermon By

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106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
November 11, 1984

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INTRODUCTION

Someone out of my early years upstate said to me recently, "You look more and more like your father". That surprised me because I never thought I resembled him. I know I didn't use to. I outgrew him by about five inches. In fact, I don't think I looked like anybody in our family, which was a source of some concern in the family. I guess they wondered where I came from, especially as I stumbled my way through adolescence, embarrassing everybody. I'm sure there were times when they privately wondered, "Who is this guy, anyway?"

So when I heard that I resembled my father now, I was a bit surprised. It's haunting. He's been gone now nearly thirty-five years...died when I was in my second year of college. But I looked at his photograph and at myself, and maybe so. I guess it's there...I can see it. It's haunting, as I say. Is my life being determined by heredity, by genes and by the environment in which I was raised? Am I determined by what happened before me or by my own decisions?

DEVELOPMENT

You've heard the advice given to young men thinking about marriage: look at your future mother-in-law, because your new wife is going to be just like her. And the same advice could be given to brides, "Like father, like son". Is that true? Are we programmed in our early years by genes and by environment to work out behavior and attitudes that we inherit, that are given to us?

A lot of psychology will back that up. Freud pointed out that adult behavior can be explained by childhood experiences. That's a rather tragic interpretation of human life - the idea that we are more controlled by forces within us than we have control over them. And you see it now - everywhere. You can't see a drama on television or the stage, or read a novel, without running into a Freudian interpretation of human behavior. It's there now in history. It's called "psycho-history". There's even "psycho-biography" - all based on the assumption that what you see is determined by what you don't see. That is, we are determined by childhood experiences and by heredity and genes.

And I think that's right - to an extent, anyway. The evidence is there. It's all over the place. Freud was on the right track. You can't listen to people talk about their lives without seeing that's right.

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE

And the Bible comes to the same conclusion. There are several psychologies in the Bible - theories of human behavior. One of them is called, "The Deuteronomic Code" - because it's found in the Book of Deuteronomy. It's based on the promise of Abraham, "If you will obey my commandments, you will prosper in the land". But the promise has a negative side to it. It says that if you do not obey my commandments then you'll pay for it. And not just you, but the generations after you. It's there in the Bible in several forms. As a command. It's there also as a story - David's biography. David's sin with Bathesheba, according to one biographer, is the direct cause of the tragedy experienced in the lives of his children. And it's there as a proverb, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

That's the Deuteronomic Code used as psychology, and it's not that different from Mr. Freud. It says our life is determined by what is given to us, by what we inherit. Our parents give us our looks. They may also have given us our troubles.

But there's much more to the Bible. The Bible is about good news, not bad! We ought to always remember that when we read about the Bible or we hear someone talking about it. The Bible is there because it's good news - not bad. Because it's about freedom and not about slavery. It says that you may not be responsible for who you are, but you are responsible for who you're going to be. If you choose to have a new life, it says, then you can have it. That's the real message of the Bible. If you choose to live the life that God created you for then you can do it. Everything else in the Bible is background for that message.

TODAY'S TEXT Our text for this morning is in the Old Testament, in the Book of Ezekiel. The Jews are preparing for disaster. They know it's going to happen, it's inevitable. The fall of Jerusalem. And they know this: its collapse is not their fault. They know that the forces that have brought this to pass originated in the behavior of their parents and their grandparents. In other words, the fall of Jerusalem is the consequence of the sin of the fathers. They put it in a proverb. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge". They are paying for the sins of their fathers. They know that and that knowledge led them to despair, to this sense of inevitability. There's nothing that we can do about our situation; it's just going to happen. And so they resolve not to do anything, but just to ride it out and make the best of it. That's their plan.

But God has a different plan and this is one of those "milestones passages" in the Bible. This is why the Bible is there. It says that God doesn't want us to be the victims of the circumstances of our life. It says that we may not be responsible for what we inherit; we may not be able to help what we receive in this life. It has brought us to where we are, but it doesn't have to keep us where we are.

That's what Ezekiel is saying in this text:

"The Word of the Lord came to me again: 'What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel... 'the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge?'... As I live, says the Lord God, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel."

In other words, you can do something about your situation. You are responsible, says Ezekiel, only for your own deeds. That's the point he makes at the conclusion of this chapter. So what you do from now on is going to determine your future - and not what has happened in the past. So the closing message of this chapter is, "Choose life and live! As I live don't let me hear that excuse any more". Don't repeat that proverb again. It may explain how you got in the mess you're in. It doesn't explain why you continue in it.

AND IN THE NEW TESTAMENT In the New Testament it's the same message in a bit different form, in the Parable of the Two Sons. "A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today'. And he answered, 'I will not' and then changed his mind... repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same, and he answered, 'I go, sir', but did not go. Now, which of the two did the will of the father?" Jesus asks. "Why the first one, of course".

Jesus said, "I tell you, the harlots and the tax collectors will go into the Kingdom of God before you."

What He is saying is that our future is not dependent on what we or anyone else has done in the past; it's dependent on what we do now - what we do in the present, those decisions we make about our lives. If you're a harlot or a tax collector and if you decide that you're going to accept the future, this new life that God has given to you - it's yours!

They couldn't believe that. It's hundreds of years after Ezekiel, but they still haven't gotten the point. They still think in the old terms. They still think that what happened back there is going to stack the cards against you - and that you're locked into some future that you're just going to have to receive. It's going to be dictated for you and there's nothing you can do about it. That's what they believe. And Jesus confounds all that and says that the Kingdom of God is a matter of your choosing God's gift. So the door is open. That's the gift. But you've got to do something about it. And that's the rub. You've got to do something. In the Bible it's given a name - "repentance". It means turning around and going in the right direction. But you can do it. I tell you, if harlots and tax collectors can do it - you can do it, too!

SUMMARIZING THUS FAR

The Bible is not about bad news; it's about good news. It's about freedom - not slavery. It's not about doors closing for you in this life, but about doors opening for you in this life. It's not about some destiny that has got you in its grip. It's about the possibilities that are always there.

Ruth Gordon had a tough time getting started as an actress. Her parents were a liability to her and she was something less than glamorous, which is considered a liability in the theater. Her early training was a discouragement. She was told at the end of her Junior Year at the School for Dramatic Arts that she couldn't continue because she had no acting talent. She ignored all that. She ignored all that had gone on in the past and went on to become one of this century's greatest actresses. In her autobiography she gives this bit of advice to other people, "Never face the facts unless you're prepared to forget them."

I like that. There is something of that defiance of inevitability in the proclamation of the Gospel. Where you turn in the New Testament, Jesus is saying to somebody, "forget the past....forget it....forget what everybody is saying about your chances of having a new life...seize the life that I am offering you now". Yes, He said that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Go out and meet it.

And when that preaching went out into the Greek world with the Apostles, it bumped into people who believed that their destiny in this life had been already set for them. They believed it had been set by astrology, by the height and the depths of the stars, and by powers up there called, "principalities and powers" and by things that are going to happen in the future which they feared, and by those things that happened in the past for which they are guilty. Paul preached a liberating Gospel in this way. "I am sure that neither death, nor life, no angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation" will be able to close the door on that future that God has now opened for you in Jesus Christ. But - you've got to do something about it. You've got to take the first step or two. And that is difficult for some to do.

BRINGING IT TO WHERE WE ARE

You may remember that several years ago a man went to court to sue his parents because his psychiatrist had told him that the problems he had in life were due to his up-

bringing, and what his parents did to him. So he sued his parents for life-long support. Now I don't remember what the judge said to him, and I don't remember how the suit came out, but I think I know what Ezekiel would have said to him if he'd been the Judge. He would probably have said something like this:

"So your fathers ate sour grapes. So what? Face it? You are a man with lousy parents and you had a deprived childhood. That's who you are. Now...what are you going to make of it? What are you going to do? Your past may explain you, but it does not excuse you."

That may seem harsh and unfeeling to some of you. And it is harsh and unfeeling, I suppose, if we are "trapped". If we are trapped, then the proper response is pity. But if we are free to choose the life that we are supposed to live, if the door is always open, if Christ has died to set you free, then the kindest words that can be spoken are, "Why don't you do something about it?"

Ezekiel says that old formula is out of date. That old way of looking upon your life that blamed the past for all of your troubles - that's gone. There's a new formula now, and it goes like this:

"The past belongs to the past and the present is up to you,
and the future is a gift from God"

That's what Jesus is trying to say to us in this parable of the Two Sons. He is saying to us that anybody in the present can go into the Kingdom simply by choosing. That's the Good News of the Bible. He says that in all of His parables. So, the question before us is: what are you going to do about it?

THE CLOSING This is not to minimize the difficulty of choosing a new life. It can be hard. Those life-long habits that we've accumulated, and those negative feelings that we have about ourselves and about others, and the terrible attitudes that we have developed over a lifetime, or have been handed to us by those who have influenced our lives. All of that constitutes, I realize, a rather formidable barrier to achieving a new life.

But - the amazing testimony of those who have overcome those obstacles is that they were not alone. They can't explain it. It's a mystery, but they say they were not alone. They say it's something like what Paul once said, "It was I - but not I". "It was the grace of God working through me". And that means that those who start out on their own courage will at the end discover they were not on their own. But they would never have known that power that lifted them in their life if they had not started out on their own.

Lines by Marianne Moore provide us with thought for reflection and meditation.

"If you tell me why the Fen
Appears impassable...I then
Will tell you why I think that I
Can get across it if I try."

If the God that you believe in is the God who has revealed Himself in Christ, then if you tell me that you think you can't change...and if you list all the reasons why you can't change - your heredity, your upbringing, all the habits and attitudes that you have accumulated over a lifetime - that form for you what

Marriane Moore in metaphor called a fen - a swamp, impassable. If you tell me you can't change, then if you believe in God, I will tell you why "I think that you can....if you try".

No more "sour grapes" Ezekiel was saying to us. "Choose life and live".