

"OF HARVESTS AND HOUSES"

INTRODUCTION

In the concluding sections of the Sermon on the Mount are two word-pictures which reflect Jesus' familiarity with the work of a farmer and the work of a carpenter. Out of his understanding of farming, he talked about harvests. And out of his understanding of carpentry, he talked about houses.

REAPING A HARVEST

First, he talked about reaping a harvest. In so doing, he offered this observation:

"You do not get grapes from thorns or figs from thistles"

He had watched the farmers around Nazareth, waging war on weeds, the most prolific of which were the thorns and the thistles. The farmers knew well enough that the grapes would be harvested from the grape vines, and the figs from the fig trees - and that what they planted, and how they cultivated it, and how they protected it from weeds - all determined the kind of harvest they would gather. "You do not", said Jesus, "get grapes from thorns or figs from thistles".

Now this seems pretty obvious to us. We are not farmers, but I think all of us have enough garden sense, even though we're city dwellers, to know that if we want tomatoes, we don't plant radishes; or if we want roses, we don't plant zinnias. Or maybe more to the point of Jesus' picture, you don't nurture the weeds in your garden and then expect to pick your favorite flowers and fruits and vegetables from the weeds. "You do not get grapes from thorns or figs from thistles".

TRUE WITH PEOPLE

Just so with people, Jesus said. For, "whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap". Strange, isn't it, how we see it so clearly when it comes to gardens, but fail to see it when it comes to our own lives. We are forever hoping against hope that we can reap a harvest that is not too closely related to the sowing that we have done. People sow laxity and license - and hope to harvest distinction and honor. People sow cheating and short-cuts - and hope to harvest respect, both self-respect and society's respect. People sow neglect and selfishness in their homes - and then hope to harvest happy, secure homes. People sow a sour, crabby, critical middle age - and hope to harvest a serene, contented old age. People sow the seeds of sensuality and enjoy momentary thrills - and then hope to harvest healthy lives of significance and service.

Linger for a moment with one aspect of this matter. An increasing chorus of voices is expressing concern over the consequences that we are beginning to reap from a reliance upon drugs. So many people, young and older alike, have been telling themselves that they can do this without danger. "Take a trip" or "blow your mind". But some of the due bills begin to come in - in a soaring rate of crimes motivated by drug addiction, in accidents compounded by the use of drugs, and in the psychological and physical effects upon drug dependents and their children.

Granted there is needed a great body of research before there can be any definitive statement about the effects of drugs. But it should be clear to anyone that while in a sense a person is free to experiment with drugs, indeed to rely on drugs, he is not free to determine the consequences. He runs the clear risk of becoming a slave to a habit that makes him a sad shadow of the person he might have been.

Sometimes you hear it said that marijuana is no more destructive in its influence than alcohol. Which may be true, but what a weak analogy. "Why does the pot call the kettle black" - or more accurately, in modern parlance, "Why does pot call the bottle clean?" It doesn't take any great amount of vision to see the harvest of folly and suffering that alcohol causes. And, parenthetically, is not part of the harvest of a generation that sought its kicks and its escapes in alcohol - now a generation that seeks its kicks and escapes in drugs? But either way, where do we get the idea that there are no serious consequences?

On the radio the other evening, I heard a doctor, the Chairman of the New York State Council on Drug Addiction, dealing with this familiar argument that marijuana is no more harmful than alcohol. It's a foolish argument, he said in effect, for either way, we end up with an intoxicated nation. And the way that he pronounced "intoxicated" emphasized the "toxic" - meaning "poisoned".

The chances are that this part of the sermon comes home to different people in different ways. I suspect that no young person today is free from the temptation and the opportunity to experiment with drugs. A lot of older people know the temptation to escape pressures and problems through alcohol. And though the rest of us may have no inclination to drink or drugs, still there is no one listening to whom this truth of Jesus does not somewhere touch home: in his emotional habits, his moral courage, his family relationships, his business decisions, his spiritual resources. Soon or late, we sit down to a banquet of consequences. And in personal lives represented in this congregation, no less than in farms in Palestine, the words of Jesus still have an authentic ring:

"You do not reap grapes from thorns and figs from thistles".

What we are talking about in our individual lives is just as true with our national life. It's amazing how we sometimes expect the harvest to be different from the seeds. We want a harvest of peace, but we put our faith and so many of our funds in an escalating armaments race. We want freedom from violence on our streets and on our campuses, but we train our youth for violence in Vietnam. We want a healthy respect for law and order, but from politicians and perhaps to common people, we develop a sharp eye for evasion and expediency. Supreme Court justices
shady dealings..

It was not a preacher, but an advertising man, Roland Gammon, who wrote these uncomfortable words in a recent issue of VARIETY:

"Silently, contagiously, sometimes inside and sometimes outside the law, the national cheating habit deepens; contract kickbacks, shady deals, political grafting, media pay-offs, business embezzlement, income concealment, labor feather-bedding, capital price-fixing, farm over-payments, shoddy workmanship, venal journalism, academic cribbing, and perhaps worst of all.....an American stampede away from responsibility".

We sometimes bemoan the fact that the American image throughout the world is tarnished - and that we do not command the respect we wish. But why should we be so surprised....really? Granted - we have a rich heritage in the past and all kinds of possibilities for the future. But there can be no real greatness apart from integrity - and national integrity is nothing but compounded personal integrity. "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people" - which is an Old Testament exposition of our text, "You do not reap grapes from thorns and figs from thistles".

BUILDING A HOUSE But Jesus not only knew farming, he also knew something about carpentry - and so he came at the same truth by talking about building a house. He said that two men could build houses that looked very much alike - same style, same apparent construction, same attractiveness. And on a clear day, looking at the houses, you would not notice any difference. But let the stormy season come, said Jesus, and then the difference became evident - and the difference was determined by the foundations. The house that was built on sand, fell. The house that was built on rock, stood.

PEOPLE LIKE THIS, TOO Again, Jesus pointed out, people are like that. On the clear and sunny days, our lives have a certain similarity to them. People look pretty much alike - going to work, to school, to parties, to church. But when the storms come, then you see the difference - and the difference again is determined by the roots beneath the surface and the rock-like qualities in the foundations.

And the storms do come. Just as they come in nature. Nature is nowhere smoothly monotonous. Anyone who was around the city this past winter experienced a few nasty, stormy days, with a couple of surprise snowstorms that snarled a plan or two. And so with our lives. There are those sunny stretches, when everything seems to be coming up roses. But inevitably, there are rough stretches. There are disappointments and detours - pains and problems. There are temptations which torment and twist us. There are tense times and chaotic conditions to live through. There are the deaths of loved ones, and the certainty of our own death. And not a single, solitary life can expect to escape the storms. Just as there is no place where the climate is perfect, so there is no person whose life is consistently smooth.

The storms, said Jesus, provide the test. Then is revealed the soundness of the construction. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick used to say that every summer when he went up to his island off the coast of Maine, he would find some trees that had blown down - too many branches above the ground and not enough rootage below the ground. And every fall when he came back to New York City, he would find some lives that had broken down for the same reason - too much strain, not enough staunchness; too many crises, not enough character.

Character and spiritual strength are not something that we are born with, or that we automatically inherit and absorb no matter how fine our family. True, in part they are the gift of God - but in part they are the results of our own decisions and choices and deeds - day in and day out. This is what Jesus was saying at the end of the Sermon on the Mount: "Every man who hears these words of mine and does them is like a man who built his house on a rock"...

All of us, at some point or other, are involved in decision making and house-building. Young people deciding what they will do in response to the tensions and the temptations that they meet. Adults deciding what they will do - in homes, offices, in solitude or society. All of us deciding how we will react to resentment, or success, or failure, to change, to human need.

"To every man there openeth - a high way and a low,
And every man decideth - the way his soul shall go"

Remember that old story about the rich man who engaged a builder to build the finest house that he ever dreamed of building. No expense was spared, and the builder was well pleased with his work until the rich man said, "The house is yours, but you must live in it". Then the botches stared at him, and he realized how

much better he could have built. The days come when a person has occasion to pause and reflect upon the structure of the life he has built. Then the botches and the blunders stare him in the face - the wrong choices, the false priorities, the twisted values. Then blessed is the man who has built in terms of character and goodness and Christian responsibility.

There was an Anglican Bishop who would address the candidates for ordination into the ministry on the eve of their ordination in these clear words:

"Tomorrow I shall say to you: wilt thou, wilt thou, wilt thou?
But there will come a day when another will say to you, 'hast thou, hast thou, hast thou?'"

However we may think of the matter of a final judgment, it is inescapably true that there do come days, just as Jesus said, when the storms batter and life has a way of asking: "Hast thou, hast thou, hast thou?"

For all of us are involved in this building business:

"Isn't it strange
That princes and kings,
And clowns that caper
In sawdust rings,
And common people
Like you and me
Are builders for eternity?"

Each is given a bag of tools,
A shapeless mass,
A book of rules;
And each must make,
E'er life is flown,
A stumbling block
Or a stepping stone".

Yes, the words of Jesus are beamed directly at every one of us. "Every one who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock...."

PRAYER Our Father - how many are the decision and the choices that will be made by us today and tomorrow and this coming week, and on into the future. Let our discipleship determine our decisions. And so may the harvest be glad, and so may the house be strong. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen