

## ON BEING MORE THAN JUST AN AVERAGE CHRISTIAN

### INTRODUCTION

Those of you who were here last Sunday morning will recall that the sermon on that occasion had to do with the saints of the Christian life, with the relatively small number of people who have gone out for honors in the Christian life and who may be compared to the honor students of a school. They are the ones who are more than average Christians, the people whose lives are translucent, the people who bring into the various walks of life the love, the compassion and the power of the living God. The sermon last Sunday was an appeal for saints, an appeal for more honor students within the Christian Church. It was an attempt on my part to make some of you say to yourselves: "I haven't been using my capacities and my abilities to their fullest possible extent. I'm only an average Christian, but I want to be more than just an average Christian and this is the time to begin."

### WHAT SHOULD I BE DOING THAT I AM NOT NOW DOING?

As I was walking home from church last Sunday, I thought to myself.....suppose someone should have come up to me following the service and said to me "Well....I'm one of those average Christians you were talking about this morning. You don't have to tell me this. I know it. I know that I have the capacity to be more than I am. I was moved by the service and some of the things you said bothered me. I want to know what I should do in order to be more than just an average Christian. What should I be doing that I am not now doing?" I thought to myself, what on earth would I say to such a person. How would I answer his question. I suppose all ministers live in the hope that one day someone will come up to him and say something like that, but the more I thought about it I wondered what on earth I would say. Would I be tempted to tell that person to go to church regularly and faithfully, Sunday after Sunday, year in and year out. Would I be tempted to tell him he ought to read a chapter of his Bible every day and to say his prayers every night before going to bed. Would I be tempted to say something like this to him: a Boy Scout does one good deed each day, go and do thou two good deeds each day. Somehow this just didn't seem to be the answer to the question. All of these things are good things mind you and we would do well to practice them regularly and faithfully in our lives, but the more I reflected upon this, the more I realized that such an answer would not be a satisfactory answer. What should I be doing in order to be more than just an average Christian? It was then that I thought of some words spoken by Jesus of Nazareth.....words perhaps that will help us to find an answer to this question.....words that you're familiar with. They're found in Matthew's Gospel and were read to us this morning as part of our scripture lesson.

"So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree," said Jesus, "cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."

The more I thought about this, the more apparent it became in my own thinking that a person is something like a tree. The person is the itself. The tree, you might say, is the character of the person - the life that gives color and texture, and quality to the fruit. The fruit is what a man does - his conduct, his behavior, the way for instance that he treats other people, the way he spends his money, the way he spends his leisure time. As this idea began to take hold in my mind, I saw very clearly the fact that what a man does is directly related to what he is. And I began to think of specific people, imaginary people

however, that you and I have known within our larger circle of friends.

DEVELOPMENT OF IDEA

To begin with, I thought of two men, both parents, and both fathers of teen-age boys. As you see the fathers go about their work, you have the feeling that both of them are good fathers. They support their families very well and both are loyal and faithful family men. One day, however, word comes to both fathers that their sons have gotten into some serious trouble. I won't say what it is; I'll leave that to your imaginations. Anyway one father rises magnificently to the situation; he doesn't minimize the trouble; neither does he magnify it. He makes himself available to the boy; he becomes a healing factor in the situation. The other father reacts in a different way. He fails the boy completely. His attitude is something like this: "Well he got himself into the trouble. It's up to him to get out of it." He closes the door and leaves it shut in the boy's face. His pride has been dealt a serious blow, and to all intents, he's through with the boy - at least for the time being. One father acts like a real father in the moment of crisis. The other father fails to be a father in the real sense of the word in an emergency. One was a good tree and when the time came it produced good fruit. The other was less than good. Jesus called it corrupt. Anyway it was less than good and when the time came, it produced fruit that was sour and bitter.

Or take another person in a situation that is somewhat different. The truth here is so obvious that it really isn't necessary for me to illustrate it for you, but once again in order to set it squarely before your eyes, let me suggest a hypothetical situation. This person looks exactly like a Christian. He goes to church regularly and faithfully. He supports the church to the best of his ability. He tries to engage in a certain amount of good works. He always stands up for the church whenever he can. But then one day this person (it could be a man or a woman. For our purposes, let's make this person a woman since the preceding illustration made use of the man)....anyway one day this person is offended seriously by another member of the congregation, or perhaps by one of the ministers. (These things happen). Well instead of being redemptive, she becomes resentful. Instead of being large-minded and gracious, instead of being a channel through which God's love can flow freely, she becomes small and petty, narrow-minded and critical, and is like a drop of poison that spreads through the congregation. The tree, in this case, is not sound and upright; as a result the fruit is apt to be bitter and sour.

I think you and I often come face to face with this truth in our own lives more often than we think we do, but we seldom take time to think about it, and that is why I'm talking to you about it here this morning....in the hope that you'll see just how true it is. For instance, you cannot expect a person who is all wrapped up in himself to do something unselfishly heroic in an emergency. You cannot expect a person who is constantly trying to be on both sides of the fence to make a clear, clean and single decision in a moment of crisis. I could go on and give other examples. You cannot expect a person who lives for his appetites and selfish desires to live for his ideals in an hour of trial. You cannot expect a person who is scornful of others and indifferent to the feelings of others to do something kind and generous for the least attractive person in the circle. In other words, all of this is simply saying that what a person does is a direct result of what a person is, and you cannot expect to change his conduct or behavior until you change him.....any more than you can expect to change the fruit on the tree unless you first of all change the tree.

So often you and I try to be better Christians by doing little things here and there along the way that will tend to raise our rating. This of course doesn't really work in the long run. I suppose you might say that it's something like the messy person who wants to have a neat and tidy apartment. And so he sets out each day to tidy it up a bit and to straighten things out. But unless he himself becomes a neat and tidy person - well-disciplined and orderly, the original mess will soon reappear. And so it is with the impatient and self-centered person who really wants to grow up a bit and do some kind and generous things for other people. He tries to be nice to others and do little things for them, but as long as he remains the same self-concerned person, he'll soon be back to where he was.

And so you see the more I thought upon these things this past week and the hypothetical person who came to me following the service (No one did. I ought to say that to you).....the more convinced I became of this fact that if a person wants to be more than just an average Christian, he must begin NOT with his conduct, but with his character, NOT with what he does, but rather with what he is.

#### PEOPLE CAN CHANGE

Thus far this morning I have been trying to point out to you that in one sense people are like trees, but now I would go on and point out to you that in another sense people are very much unlike trees. A tree cannot change, but a person can change. I may be open to correction by those of you who know more about trees than I do and who are familiar with the miracles being wrought today by the fruit growers by way of grafting, but I think it is say for me to say that generally speaking people can change, but trees cannot.

"Ah...." but you say, "That's such a big order to set before us. Change? We can't change. Do you think that you can change the disposition of a man's soul in the autumn years of life? Do you think you can change the color of a person's character after that person has hit the years of middle age? Do you think you can change the whole tone and temper of a person's spirit?" Yes. I think you can. It can be done. I wouldn't be in this work if I did not have some convictions along this line. I believe people can be changed. We have seen instances of this time and again. We have seen radical changes - like the one that Saul of Tarsus experienced, or the change that took place in the life of Augustine or Francis of Assisi. These were radical changes mind you. Perhaps the changes that interest us the most are not the violent changes, but rather the changes that take place gradually in our lives in the course of a lifetime. This type of situation I think would be more akin to our lives.

Sometimes it is easier for us to understand some of these things by seeing them reflected in the lives of people. I don't know how many of you who are here this morning are acquainted with the life of Rufus Jones. In the event you are not let me introduce him to you at this point in our thinking together. Rufus Jones stands outside of our own particular religious tradition; as a matter of fact, I'd venture to say he stands outside of ~~most~~ of the traditions represented here this morning. He was a Quaker. An author, mystic, teacher, lecturer, he passed away in 1948 and is considered by many people to be one of the greatest spiritual giants ever produced in America. The reason I have chosen him as an example here this morning is because as you read his life, you do not find the same intense, inner spiritual struggle taking place that you normally associate with the saints of the Christian life.

No radical changes. No great spiritual conversion experience. He is regarded as one of the sunnier dispositions in the gallery of Christian saints. In view of this I was interested to read recently certain facts concerning his life that came as something of a surprise to me. For instance, his biographer points out that he had very weak eyes, and because of this he suffered a great deal. In his first teaching position his friends had to read to him a great deal. He was under par physically although he looked strong and healthy. He suffered from hay fever, asthma and indigestion. He also suffered from great periods of depression and this too - the weather always affected him. (That made me feel much better). "The weather" he once said "molds me like wax". In other words, there were some things in his life that caused him concern and with which he had to struggle, and yet he apparently managed to conquer them. There was one line in his biography that spoke to me. "Rufus Jones" it said "had to learn how to live above the level of his moods". I think that's worth repeating and writing down in our thoughts and taking out of here with us. "He had to learn how to live above the level of his moods". An example, perhaps not the best, of a great life that changed the nature of the tree until the elements that were wild, the elements that were bitter and sour were brought under control. It can be done. He did it and many, many others have done it.....made significant changes in the nature of the tree.

WHAT CAN I DO? We began with this question: what can I do, or what should I be doing that I am not now doing in order to be more than just an average question. It's hard to give specific instructions to each one of you for each person and each personality is different. About all I can do is to make you more aware of these things and where you are at the present moment in this matter. One or two things to point out to all of you here briefly at the end which will be more in the way of general instructions, or observations.

First of all, it's not so much a matter of conduct and behavior as it is a matter of improving or changing the basic nature of the tree. Do you see what I mean? And I would go on to say that where this change or improvement has been made, it has been made because above all else they have wanted to be channels of God's love in the world and to keep that channel clear. This has been their supreme concern and everything else has been secondary to that. Perhaps this will frighten us because for most of us this is only one interest among many and of course it goes without saying that no great change will be made as long as that remains true. In other words, get the center right and the circumference will take care of itself.

And then the other thing is this - as you consider the people who have experienced this gradual change and improvement in their lives, you will see that it was because in one way or another they have gotten very, very close to God. This made sound strange to some of you, and yet it's true. They have managed to get close to God, close to the fundamental reality of all life, closer to Christ, if you will. There are those who have felt their way to him; their emotions are more sensitive and active than their minds. (Here I am thinking of some of the emotional experiences some of you had in Madison Square Garden a few years ago when BG was here). Others think their way to him; the powers of the mind, their intellect, their reason is more active than their emotions. Others come to Him by way of the sacraments, mystically. Some like Rufus Jones come in a quite different way - the way of silence, and then Christian action. But the important thing to remember is to get close to God, closer than you now are, to get into

such a close association with him that his spirit will get into you and you more and more will grow into his spirit.

The result of this will certainly be good. You'll become one of those rare individuals who shines like a star in the night. And how we need people like that today. We often turn to them when the night is dark and ~~km~~ we wonder whether we'll ever find our way. We often turn to them when we wonder if we shall ever change, whether we can actually break loose from those things that hold us back. They stand before us like good trees producing good fruit saying to us:

You can change. It can be done.  
Get close to Him, closer than you now are.  
Learn of Him and of his ways.  
And as you do, you'll grow to be more than just  
an average Christian.

LET US PRAY:

God our Father, we thank thee for the lives of those through the light of thy presence has come into our world. Help us to learn from them. And as we ~~grow~~ are drawn to that man from Galilee who is our Lord and Master, grant that we may be grafted in him, rooted in him so that our lives may be his instruments and he may be in us and we in him. Amen