

"ON CUTTING YOUR LOSSES"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 21, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

I read about a man recently in India who hasn't cut the nails on his left hand since the year 1952...forty-five years. He holds the Guinness World Record for long fingernails....but he really doesn't care about world fame and fingernails. His one goal is to make some money out of this somewhat dubious accomplishment. He says that he hasn't had a good night's sleep in 30 years and that he has had visions of how his nails will one day look in a glass case attached to a plaster replica of his 56 year old left hand. His problem is that up to this time no one has offered him enough money for all his effort. Oh, someone once offered him one hundred thousand dollars back in 1991....but he's holding out for more. Not fame. Fortune!

He and his wife live in a grimy cubicle in the market area of Pune, India. There they share a narrow cot and their daughter sleeps on the floor. Their rent is \$ 1.60 a month. Imagine turning down one hundred thousand dollars to cut your fingernails while your family lives in poverty. Perhaps someone should tell him that he really needs to cut his losses, so to speak. Anyway, I thought about this man from India when I read about our text for today. Jesus says,

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off...and if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. For it is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes than to be thrown into hell...."

Pretty strong words. Jesus, of course is employing hyperbole. I don't think He really means for us to cut off a body part, so relax....sit back...and see where this leads us for He is giving us some pretty important advice.

EVALUATE YOUR LIFE'S PATH

One thing He is saying to us is: evaluate your life's path. He's saying in so many words.... ask yourself: what is your ultimate goal. For He says,

"It is better for you to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye....than to enter hell with two eyes...."

He says, "look...you've got a goal...hopefully it is to enter the Kingdom of God". So, be careful and don't trip up before you make your way to the door of that glorious Kingdom. As Stephen Covey put it in his best selling book, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,

"Begin with the end in mind and keep your eye fixed there.....evaluate your life's path....take stock".

Frequently, the difference between the person who enjoys big accomplishments and the person who does not is that the former dreamed big dreams and set high goals to reach them. In the comic strip, Marvin, Marvin is heard to say,

"I think it's important to establish goals in life. I have set both short-term and long-term goals for myself"

And as he sucks on his bottle, he goes on to explain...

"My short-term goal is to get fed again in four hours, (then he adds)...and my long term goal is to get fed again in eight hours....."

Unfortunately too many of us are aiming no higher than Marvin. Instant gratification is all we're interested in. The short term is what turns us on. We have few if any long-term plans for our lives.

Once upon a time, there was some barren land where wood was quite scarce. But a certain citizen knew of a hidden forest where there was plenty of wood and so he availed himself of it and when people asked for some of his timber, he asked them, "And what will you do with it?"

Well, those who wanted firewood were politely turned away, but those people who wished to build homes or cabinets were given the wood they needed. The keeper of the forest wanted to encourage long-term thinking. He knew that many people continually focus on the immediate - building a fire to keep warm - and were apt to neglect the far-off....building a home. The point is that we would do well to look down the road ten, twenty, thirty years and see where we are headed. If we have a clearly defined destination, then many of us would choose better roads to travel in order to get there and we would know when we have arrived.

Back in 1965 Allen Schwartz of this city became the law partner of Ed Koch. Koch, at that time, was almost forty and had made only a slight dent or ripple in the sea of NYC politics. Nevertheless....as Allen Schwartz and Ed Koch sat in their law office at 53 Wall Street early in 1966, Koch made a rather startling prediction. Schwartz's wife had just given birth to a son, David, and the two men were talking about it.

"He will have his Bar Mitzvah in Gracie Mansion" said Koch...sounding as if he meant it. Schwartz looked at him, somewhat amazed. His modestly successful law partner was promising to be Mayor of this city by the time of David's Bar Mitzvah. He thought Ed Koch was just a bit off his rocker...but, you know, 13 years later, Ed Koch was Mayor of this city and David Schwartz got to celebrate his Bar Mitzvah over at Gracie Mansion.

Ed Koch was always full of confidence. We know that. But, he also had a plan. A vision. He could see where his life's path could lead him. And since many of us have no fixed direction for life....no challenging goals, no high and lofty purpose...we do not achieve all that we might accomplish in life. So, first-off then....EVALUATE YOUR LIFE AND THE PATH YOU'RE TRAVELLING.

LOOK TO THE LITTLE THINGS

And step-two, if you will. Look to the little things. Those little things can cause us terror and trouble. Jesus is reminding us here that it is the little things: a hand, a foot, an eye....that so often can defeat us. There's an old proverb from India that goes, "Men trip not on mountains; they stumble on stones." And how true it is.

While browsing at a rather chic clothier, 19 year old Jonathan Parker felt that he needed three leather jackets in the worst possible way. The price was a little bit too high and so he decided that he would take a "five finger discount".....that is, he was going to steal them. Let me tell you what happened along the way...

First, he surveyed the premises carefully and spotted every shoplifter's nightmare - a sensor alarm in front of the shop's Exit Door. He knew that the merchandise was tagged with those tiny magnetic strips and if he tried to slip out with any tagged merchandise, the sensor would set off a pretty loud siren. Undaunted, Jonathan grabbed some jackets that suited his taste and ducked into the nearest dressing room. And thoroughly searching the jackets, he found all the magnetic strips and carefully peeled them off. He found them inside sleeves and pockets and under collars and along the waistband. Oh, Jonathan was very proud of himself as he flicked the last of the strips onto the floor and then stuffing the jackets under his coat and boldly walking toward the front Exit Door, he was just about to depart when a loud, piercing scream of the alarm went off, alerting the security guard who quickly apprehended our thorough young thief.

Well, Jonathan was stunned. Had he not searched every inch of those jackets? The security guard searched the stolen jackets and he couldn't find any magnetic strips either...so WHY had the alarm gone off? The guard proceeded to look a little deeper and in so doing, he looked right into the sole of the matter...the sole of Jonathan's shoe, that is. There he discovered four or five of the little magnetic strips which Jonathan had thrown to the floor and then stepped on. The young man was arrested and charged with shop-lifting. Sticky fingers and sticky shoes....they'll get you every time.

Or, what about the suspected Columbian drug kingpin who had eluded the authorities for two years was caught down in Orlando at Universal Studios for shoplifting souvenirs. Amazing. A drug kingpin arrested for shoplifting.

And remember how a few years ago a President Debate with more than a million viewers watching was held up for 27 minutes...silence for 27 minutes....all because a one dollar capacitor malfunctioned. A tiny piece of equipment that cost \$ 1.00 caused the problem. And Mariner I, bound for Venus, headed off course and had to be destroyed (at a cost of 18.5 million)....what caused it....an anonymous flight computer programmer had somehow...left out a comma from the Mariner's Computer Program.

Look to the little things. The little foxes eat the vines.

ARE LITTLE FOXES GNAWING THE VINES OF YOUR LIFE?

The question that all of this is leading up to is

this: are there some little foxes gnawing at the vines of your life? Think about it and be honest.

Here's a good example. A motivational speaker once said that he had quit reading the papers and watching the news on television. He said that once upon a time he had been something of a "news junkie"....that is, he would read the newspapers through every morning. And then in the evening he would sit in front of television for one hour to get both local and world news. And his car radio was always set on a news station.

One day he stopped to add up the hours he spent reading, watching and listening to the news and he realized that he was spending the equivalent of one and a half workdays a week on just the news! Think of it. A full day and a half on the news. And what was he receiving in return...pratically nothing that benefited his life. Most news stories were simply extended stories of the story from the preceding day. But there's more...

Ninety per-cent of the stories were depressing and sometimes down-right infuriating. None of them improved the quality of his life. Now...suppose he decided that he were to spend his driving time listening to inspirational tapes rather than the news. Suppose he were to spend the time he devoted to reading the local paper and watching the news casts on TV to reading material that would advance his career or help him to enlarge spiritually. And so, he made this step. At first, cutting off the news was like cutting off a hand, but the result was dramatic. Not only did he get more work done, but he had no difficulty keeping up with the significant news stories at all. He soon found that if any story was really important, other people would be talking about it and he could keep up through them.

Look after the little things. That is the point of this passage. Diversions that distract you from your goals...time wasters that drain the hours out of your day. One of the best antidotes to sin is the realization that sin always keeps you from your goals, your path, your real heart's desire. In fact, it could be one more way of defining sin. It is anything in your life that is an impediment to your being all that God has created you to be.

ACT DECISIVELY And finally, Jesus would say this...learn to act decisively. Let's face it: cutting off a hand or plucking out an eye is about as decisive an act as we can ever take.

If you see that your life can be better, whether it is your home life or your work or your life as a follower of Christ, and if you see that there are things that are keeping you from achieving what God means for you to achieve, don't "pussy-foot around" as the southern politician use to say...GET INTO ACTION!

By the way, I see that someone has invented a new word. It's called CATMATIC. And it's the opposite of DOGMATIC. Dogmatic people are those who have opinions on just about everything and are always expressing those opinions and never permitting the other person to express theirs. We all know of people like that. On the other hand is that person who tends to pussyfoot around. They never make firm decisions. They never seem to go into action and get something worthwhile accomplished. We all know of people like that. Which are you? Dogmatic? Or, catmatic.

I've always enjoyed the story about the farmer who was in need of a farm-hand who posted a notice in the local village. Three very promising young men responded, and the farmer sat down with each one in turn. He asked the first youth about his background and concluded the interview with a peculiar question. "Tell me...how long can you work with a stone in your shoe?" "Half a day" responded the young man. The farmer thanked him and sent him on his way.

The farmer then spoke with the second young man, again concluding the interview with the same question. "How long can you work with a stone in your shoe?" "All day long" boasted the boy. The farmer thanked him for coming and then sent him on his way. The farmer then met with the third young man. "How long can you work with a stone in your shoe?" he asked him in the final moment of the interview. "Not a minute" exclaimed the youth.

"When I get a stone in my shoe, I take it out right away!" The farmer hired the third young man on the spot.

Is there some stone in your shoe....as you walk life's path? Some stone that may be impeding your progress. If there is, may I encourage you to get rid of it and do it now - TODAY! You may be in a relationship that is tearing you down...tearing you apart. You may be in a work situation that you know is destroying you. You may have a situation in your family that you cannot continue without a tremendous amount of pain and hurt. This may be the time - the day - the moment - to move into action....to cut it off or to pluck it out.

Above all else, Jesus wants you to know the JOY of living in His Kingdom, here and now. Yes, He wants you to think "long term"....and to rid ourselves of those little things that pull us down and keep us from being all that we were created to be. You know what they are. Act now. Today and act decisively!

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness, to Your presence in these moments....for we believe that the deepest things within us are being stirred up in this act of worship, and that down below the surface of our lives, Your Spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be. Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love.

Cleanse us from narrow and destructive thinking....from evil thoughts... and ugly egotism....from our indifferent apathy...from sinful lusts....that we may be ready for this transforming experience. May we hear Your voice speaking to each of us...reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us to life on the higher levels....

You have come to us in Christ and through Him, we come to You. In his name we now pray. Amen.

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Once upon a time, there was some barren land where wood was quite scarce. But a certain citizen knew of a hidden forest where there was plenty of wood and so he availed himself of it and when people asked for some of his timber, he asked them, "And what will you do with it?"

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Or, what about the suspected Columbian drug kingpin who had eluded the authorities for two years....caught down in Orlando at Universal Studios for shoplifting souvenirs. Amazing! A drug kingpin arrested for shoplifting.

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"When I get a stone in my shoe, I take it out right away!" The farmer hired the third young man on the spot.

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Above all else, Jesus wants you to know the JOY of living in His Kingdom, here and now. Yes, He wants you to think "long term"....and to rid ourselves of those little things that pull us down and keep us from being all that we were created to be. You know what they are. Act now. Today and act decisively! Cold turkey. With God's help and strength, you can!

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness, to Your presence in these moments....for we believe that the deepest things within us are being stirred up in this act of worship, and that down below the surface of our lives, Your Spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and the best that we are meant to be. Wrestle with us until we are conquered by Your love.

Cleanse us from narrow and destructive thinking....from evil thoughts... and ugly egotism....from our indifferent apathy...from sinful lusts....that we may be ready for this transforming experience. May we hear Your voice speaking to each of us...reassuring us, challenging us, summoning us to life on the higher levels....

You have come to us in Christ and through Him, we come to You. In his name we now pray. Amen.