

THE ART OF GROWING OLDER

INTRODUCTION

The sermon this morning begins with an interesting fact about ourselves, and the fact that I refer to is simply this that people today are living longer, considerably longer than the people of one hundred years ago. I'm not sure just what the average length of life is; it seems to me that it's somewhere in the high sixties or the low seventies. This longer life span is due to several factors. Certainly the advances and discoveries made by modern medicine have had something to do with it. Certainly the relief from hard labor due to the mechanization of industry has had something to do with it. All of this is desirable, but this situation at the same time has created some interesting problems for a great many people. One of them is, of course, the need for greater financial planning for old age. I was reading recently where out of every one hundred people over sixty-five, thirty four still work for a living; twenty-two are dependent on public assistance; seventeen are cared for by relatives; thirteen live on savings; eleven are supported by social security; and three are supported chiefly by retirement systems.

However there's something far more important than just providing for financial security for old age. Let me put it this way. I think it's the problem of cultivating a philosophy that makes life creative and good through the years, even to the end of life. And this is what I want to talk to you about for several minutes here this morning. Someone once asked a famous doctor when old age set in. He replied: "The day you're born". There's some truth in that observation. Indeed some people are older at forty than others are at seventy. Some people attribute their long life to drinking six cups of coffee daily; others to doing without. Some to exercise; others to refraining from exercise. Some to eating meat; others to being vegetarians. Some to smoking; others to not smoking. Some to loafing; others to working. As mature Christians, we need to be concerned not only with the span of years, but with the quality of life. And when a sound philosophy for growth has been established, then a person is unafraid of the future no matter whether he's forty-five or seventy-five. The Art of Growing Older. I'd like to suggest to you three things that ought to be incorporated into everyone's formula for growing older.

THE FAITH THAT ACCEPTS CHANGE AS AN ASSET FOR LIVING.....

living.

The first factor in a Christian's formula for growing older is a faith that accepts change as an asset for

Some of you may remember a book that appeared several years entitled The Man Who Lived Backward. The author of this particular book carried his main character Mark Selby through a long career of living backward. His life was lived from World War II back to the concluding days of the Civil War. The book came to a close as Selby, through his foreknowledge of historical events made a desperate but futile attempt to save Abe Lincoln from assassination by Booth in 1865.

The fictional experiences of Mark Selby have often been symbolical of our own desires. As the years begin to catch up with us, we frequently submit to the temptation of wanting to live backwards. So often we find ourselves retreating to some comfortable shelter that lives on in our memory. So often we're afraid of the unknown future. We resist change. We tend to measure the changing present by some fixed point in the past. Mind you, this is not always good. It betrays a lack of

faith. God has made change an elemental part of life, and he has given us infinite capacities to adapt to new conditions and circumstances.

Curiously enough religious people have not always accepted this principle. In fact, good people have opposed many good things because they had that painfully new appearance. For instance, antiseptics and anesthetics were refused by a great many religious people when they first came on the market. People said that if God wanted people to suffer, no one should interfere. An interesting paragraph presented itself to me this past week while I was preparing this sermon, and since it ties into what I'm saying, I'll share it with you:

"When railroads were first proposed, Daniel Webster said that the frost on the railroads would prevent the train from starting, and if it did move it could not be stopped.....he had no use for opening up the western part of our country. Chancellor Livingston of New York also opposed railroads saying that 'No one in his right mind would risk his life rushing through the air at the rate of 12 to 15 miles an hour'"

How times change. I wonder what he'd say to our subway system. Perhaps he'd still say the same thing. Anyway we often assume a similar attitude to things in our own lives. Actually I think we're foolish to stake out a permanence residence at any given point in our thinking our careers. Time brings inevitable changes, and we need to remember this. Our business methods change. Our families change. Our friends change. Our health changes. Our economic condition changes. Our tastes and attitudes change. Our abilities change. We need to thank God that this is so. I think we'd soon get bored to death if we had no changes at all. These changes help us to develop. We can use them, good or bad, to serve great ends. They challenge the best in us. Static living is deadly to our souls. So much of our unhappiness comes from living rigidly, from becoming inflexible to the demands of time. Let me just bring this first point together by saying this that the person of faith sees in the changes of life the very stuff of life itself, and the person of faith with a strong anchorage in God's changeless laws faces the changing years eagerly and without fear.

THE FAITH THAT FINDS THE PRINCIPLE OF
COMPENSATION AT WORK THROUGH THE YEARS

Moving on then, a second factor that is involved in this art of growing older can be

summed up in this fashion. This art of growing older also demands a faith that finds the principle of compensation at work through the years. Now suppose we break down that sentence into easier terms. What do we find.

Harry Newman, a psychologist connected with the Institute of Technology in Illinois, has compiled a timetable of worriers. It shows that our primary worry at the age of 18 is idealism and personal appearance; at 20, personal appearance; at 23, morality; at 26, making a good impression. At 30, we begin to worry about pay and the cost of living; at 31, business success; at 33, job security; at 38, health. After the thirties, our worries follow another pattern. At 41, we worry mostly about political convictions; 42, marital difficulties; 45, giving up our ambitions. And over 45, the main worry for most people is apt to be centered around their health.

Now it is true, is it not that each period of life has for us its

own set of peculiar problems. But at the same time, let us remember this too that each period of life has its own set of assets as a sort of compensation for the price the years extract. As our responsibilities become heavier, our insights also ought to be deepening. As our bodies begin to slow down, our spirits ought to be becoming more alert. If our health is impaired, we can remain strong of mind and soul. The point is this that we need to live each span of life realistically and find in it the resources that God can provide for us. We don't have to submit to the problems of age, we can outwit them. I have a ministerial friend who is just had his sixtieth birthday, and he was telling me that before he reaches the age of sixty-five, he wants to learn how to play the piano. And he's already taking piano lessons. Apparently he's always wanted to know how to play the piano. I admire him. How many people here today past the age of sixty would think of learning how to play the piano. The same gentleman recently took up ping-pong as a new interest, and mind you, already he's developed into an outstanding player for his age.

There is one over-arching compensation for every person in every period of life. I just want to touch on it briefly as we come to the end of this second point. It might be called the universal capacity of man to live by the great and unseen values of life. It grows out of our faith in God. It gives us something big and permanent for which to live. It shows us how to find joy in useful service to others. When we find this faith, nothing that the years destroy can hurt us. We need this overarching balance. Someone pointed out recently that "We Americans spend so much time on things that are urgent that we have very little time left for the things that are important." And how true it is of all of us. Real living, so it seems to me, is not a matter of years or achievements. It's much more a matter of ideals, and appreciations and directions. In our busy world, we would do well to slow down and spend more time in worship, in love, in prayer, in serving, in giving of ourselves in order to refurbish and refresh our souls. If we don't, we'll find the passing years gradually smothered under the endless stream of meaningless activities.

A FAITH THAT FINDS INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FUTURE..

The third factor involved in this art of growing older revolves around the development of a faith that finds increasing opportunities in the future. A few weeks ago I stopped in at the Doctor's Office in order to have a physical check up. While I was sitting in the waiting room, I became engrossed in an article in one of the medical magazines that had to do with retirement. I copied down one or two sentences from the article thinking that they might tie in with this sermon:

"The reason so many retired men die mentally is because they stop doing everything they do not want to do. When they do that, they also stop growing. Growth is the result of assuming obligations and responsibilities. Retirement is often a state of slow decay and death. The minds of too many retired people become stagnant pools."

There's some truth in this for all of us. Most of us, I think, shrink from doing things we do not want to do. So often we seek the easy, protected way. And when we stand still, whether at 30, at 40, at 50, or at 60, we stagnate. And stagnation breeds discontentment and unhappiness. We begin to recoil from the problems of the years. We're afraid of what the future might bring. We have too much time

left to think about ourselves. All of this adds up to a betrayal of God and a demonstration of our lack of faith.

The fact is this and here is where I want to pinpoint this third thought. The mature years of life hold just as much for a person as he or she is willing to take. There are opportunities for people at 70 just as there are opportunities at 50. Increasing age has never been a drawback to achievement. Verdi wrote great operas at 80. Goethe was 80 when he wrote Faust. We think of men in our own times who are still contributing a great deal to humanity even though they are elder citizens: Baruch, Churchill, Schweitzer, Herbert Hoover and in our own Methodist Church, we think of someone like Bishop Welch who recently had his 94th birthday and still active in the affairs of the church.

There are opportunities for service right here in our own church for those who want them. Let me just say this once again, that it's not always the number of years that count. It's our attitude toward them I suppose that really counts. Someone has named the seven ages of the woman: the infant; the little girl, the miss; the young woman; the young woman; the young woman; the young woman. It's not the years that count, but our attitude toward them that makes life really meaningful. We need to remember that getting old means growing. And there's nothing wrong with growing. It takes a long time to build something great. A sequoia tree takes longer for growth than a sapling. No matter what our present age or circumstances may be, God would have us see that the years ahead can be filled with opportunities for the building of a life of beauty and power. God help you to accept the challenge of the years that are yet to be, for some of you, "The last of life, for which the first was made".

I close with those stirring lines by Edwin Markham:

"I am done with the years that were; I am quits.
I am done with the dead and the old.
They are minds worked out; I delved in their pits;
I have saved their grain of gold.

Now I turn to the future for wine and bread;
I have bidden the past adieu.
I laugh and lift hand to the years ahead;
Come on. I am ready for you.

LET US PRAY:

Help us, Our Father, as we grow in years, also to grow in our knowledge of Thee and of Thy Son. Help us to gain from our experiences, to keep up with the progress of the world, to be willing to change our ways and our plans if needs be. And help us always to look forward to a world beyond this where we shall continue to live with Thee. Amen