

## "ON LIVING ALL YOUR LIFE"

TEXT: "The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10)

INTRODUCTION During the First World War an American chaplain in France received a letter from a small boy in this country. The boy was just beginning to write and he concluded his letter with these words: "I send you my love, and I hope you will live all your life".

What the boy meant was plain enough. When he said that he hoped his older friend would live all his life he was expressing cheerfully the desire that the friend would not meet with an untimely end. However, as you roll these words over in your mind you discover they can mean much more.

For instance, they suggest that many of us do not live all of our lives. They remind us that there is a difference between living and just being alive. They carry the hint that some of us live not with the whole but with only a part of ourselves. Like excessive carbon in an automobile engine which makes it spit and sputter and which robs it of its full power, so sometimes there develops in the machinery of our lives an excessive amount of some harmful substance which keeps us from living at the full strength of our finer energies. We lack life to the full; we look for someone who can do for us what the mechanic does for our car when he cleans the engine and restores it to the full capacity of its power.

It is no accident that we find our Lord promising the very thing that we desire. In the familiar words of the text, he makes this claim: "I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly". We want life to the full. Jesus says it is his business to give us just that. We believe that he can; we look now to see how.

The insights of modern medicine and the study of psychiatry have pointed out to us that there are several dangers that are menacing to life. I would list four of them here this morning and strangely enough, they are the very four dangers which the Gospel is equipped to remove.

I. SELF-CENTEREDNESS The first is self-centeredness and it comes from putting the self at the center of everything and making everything else revolve around that center. You have only to listen to people talk to discover what they are interested in. The NY Telephone Company made a study some time ago of telephone conversations to find out what word is used most frequently. It was the pronoun "I". It was used 3,990 times in 500 conversations - an average of 79 each.

When Jesus announced himself as the one who came to bring life, he contrasted himself with the enemy of life whom he calls a thief. "The thief" he said, "cometh not, but for to kill, steal and destroy". Self-centeredness is a thief which kills, steals and destroys.

Here is a church which sent a missionary to China. The donors to his support thought it would be a good idea to supply the missionary with a printing press and type so that he might use it to print a paper which would bring back reports of his mission. When the first issue was printed, it stopped abruptly in the middle of this announcement: "I regret it is impossible to finish this issue, but we have run out of capital 'I's'".

Too much capital "I" usually ends in some such frustration as that. An old Persian legend tells about a father who went on a long journey and left his son with a mirror. When he returned he discovered that the boy had starved to death looking at himself. That is an ancient way of putting the fact that self-centeredness ends in self-destruction.

When you read the Gospel, you note that Jesus knew all about self-centeredness as a danger menacing to life and that he set himself to save his friends from it. Time and time again you find him saying this: "He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it". Look around among your friends and you will see that the unhappiest people you know are those whose lives are bounded on the north, east, south, and west by themselves - for the word misery is closely akin to the word miser. Whereas the people you know who are finding life to the full are those who have taken their cue from Christ and have lost themselves in other people, other causes, and especially in God and his Kingdom.

## II. PERSONAL RESENTMENT

A second enemy of life to the full is personal resentment. Someone steps on your toes and slights you, or injures you or offends you in some way, and you resent it. You feel that justice demands that you get even and so you go on from harboring a grudge to positive hatred. But hatred, too, is like the thief which Jesus describes. It, too, kills, steals and destroys.

The late Albert Beaven of Rochester once wrote that when he was in college there was a student to whom he owed a grudge debt. There was a tree on the campus which bore burrs covered over with thorns as sharp as porcupine needles. He decided that he would run one of those burrs into that fellow's back. So he went down to the tree and picked up one of them and put it in his pocket. He carried it for three days, waiting for his chance. It was not a pleasant thing to carry in his pocket, because every now and then as he shifted in his seat in class it would stick him. But at last he caught his man at a secluded spot on the campus, pinned him to the ground, reached into his pocket for his weapon of torture. But he was disgusted, because as he applied it to the back of his victim, he discovered all the sting was gone; he had worn off all the thorns on himself by carrying the burr in his pocket.

So he says is resentment: we punish ourselves more than others. The doctors are discovering every day how true it is that emotional causes have physical effects. High blood pressure and ulcers are particularly susceptible to anger and resentment. Here is a physician who tells about a patient with an ulcer who was discharged from the hospital as cured; but later that patient became angry with his son and during that weekend of anger the ulcer returned. Another tells about a woman who disliked her son-in-law whom she visited once a year. On each visit she developed arthritis, and each time she returned home she got well. Every day there are people who are digging their graves with their grudges.

He who came to bring life to the full as a word for us here. The more you read the Gospel the more you are impressed with the emphasis which He placed upon that magnanimity of spirit which can overcome ill will with good will. He tells us to ask God to forgive us as we forgive others who have wronged us. He insists that there be no limit to our forgiveness. We are to keep it up 70 times 7. He tells us to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, to pray for those who spitefully use us. Jesus is right: love is not a luxury, but a necessity. And when you have learned to take your cue from Christ, you have gone a long way toward finding life to the full.

## III. GUILT

Another of the dangers which menace life is a sense of guilt. The sin which weighed heavily on the conscience of Judas was so unbearable that it caused him to destroy himself. It is so common an enemy today that we have a name for it: we call it a "guilt complex", and the people who sit around doctor's offices can tell you that it continues to be destructive.

I read the other day that in an attempt to make air travel safe, there has been installed in many planes an instrument, locked and sealed at the back, which keeps an absolutely accurate record of everything that happened on the journey - the speed, the altitude, the ups and downs - everything is recorded. At the end the instrument is unsealed; and no matter what the pilot may say - the record is there. It is a mechanical conscience, but it is no more accurate than the moral conscience concealed within the depths of our human nature.

Your conscience always tells you that you ought to do what is right and when you disobey you have to pay with a sense of guilt. I recall a line I read recently which said that your conscience is something that makes you worry over what it cannot keep you from doing, and when you say that your sense of guilt makes you sick - you are telling the truth.

So close is the connection between a sense of guilt and good health that spiritual therapy has been called modern medicine's newest ally, and the following story has to do with the work of a minister on a hospital in North Carolina. There was the case of a 43 year old business man who, for more than a year, had been a puzzler to the gastroenterology section of the hospital. He had been treated for repeated severe relapses of a digestive disturbance, and now he was back again with his most acute attack - one that could easily prove to be fatal. The minister called in to a staff conference. "Something is eating this man", said the internal specialist, "that neither the psychiatrist nor I have been able to discover. He has admitted mental and emotional distress over a divorce two years ago, plus various business matters; and he's had the best help that psychiatry can give in handling such anxieties. But I suspect we've both been treating the symptoms. Maybe you can uncover the real cause".

For several hours the minister sat by the patient's bedside, skillfully leading him to talk about his problems. Finally he blurted out, "There's something else that I haven't told you; I've got to get it off my chest." And out came the details of an affair he was having with a married woman. "Just yesterday", he said, "her husband found out. Last night I had this attack. There must be some connection. What can I do?"

The minister replied, "You've diagnosed your own case. You can write your own prescription. Isn't it that you must break off the affair, confess, and ask forgiveness of the two people you have wronged and of God whose laws you have violated?" "You can be well only when you take that medicine. Are you?" The patient was ready and he did. In the five years since he has had no recurrence of his trouble.

IV. ANXIETY Self-centeredness, resentment, guilt, and finally anxiety. There is no better way to describe it than the way Jesus does: it is a thief. It robs, steals, kills, destroys. It steals your peace of mind, destroys your efficiency, and makes a shamble of your health.

You cannot read the Gospel without seeing that anxiety is one of the things Jesus talked about constantly. He seems to have had more to say about anger and anxiety than anything else. He knew them to be harmful. He was always saying to his people: "Take therefore no thought for the morrow....sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof". His point seems to be that every day has evil enough of its own, and it doesn't make sense to rob today of its strength by worrying over tomorrow's trouble; for while anxiety does no good, it is capable of much harm.

He not only counseled against anxiety - but he offered a cure! The cure for fear is faith. Fear not - only believe. Believe in God - as your Father, as your friend, who desires the best for you and will always see you through. Look around you and see how he cares for the birds and the flowers and know that you mean more to him than either. If he cares for them, he will surely do no less for you.

There is a story about Bishop Quayle that stays in the mind. The Bishop had a quaint way of putting things. One night he was unable to drop off to sleep. He stayed awake for hours worrying over some matters and problems for which he did not see a solution. All of a sudden the door to his room opened and Somebody walked in. He looked up and saw that it was God. God wanted to know what the matter was. When the Bishop told him, God said: "Now Quayle, you go to sleep and I'll sit up and the rest of the night". You have gone a long way toward finding life to the full when you decide to let God do your worrying.

CLOSING It was said at the beginning that there are four dangers that menace the full life - the abundant life. Self-centeredness. Resentment. A guilt complex. Anxiety. We also said that Jesus made the claim that he could deliver us from these dangers. And he can. For self-centeredness - a widening horizon that takes in others. For resentment - a love that forgives and forgets. For the sense of guilt - the promise of God's pardon. For fear and anxiety - a faith that trusts.

LET US PRAY: As we go on our way with the winds often against us, help us, O God, to trust and believe in the best we know, to do the best we can and to be the best we are. Lead us more and more into the deep understanding of the truth that is in Christ Jesus - that we may be saved to live the life that is full and abundant. In His name we pray. Amen