

"OUR DESIRE TO BE LIKED"

INTRODUCTION C. S. Lewis, in one of his novels, has this to say about one of the characters: "Mark liked to be liked". A simple line - a line that could be said, I think, of any one of us. "Mark liked to be liked". Nothing runs deeper in human nature than the desire to be appreciated, the desire to be accepted. You see it in people of every age. You see it in children: the craving for approval, the attempt to secure attention and recognition. You see it in teenagers: eager to be acceptable and congenial in their circle, dreading the possibility of being without friends. You see it in adults: the desire to be a success socially, to be wanted, welcomed, accepted, liked, included.

Anyone who saw Arthur Miller's play, Death of a Salesman, remembers Willy Loman, its central character. Perhaps those who saw either the play or the movie at some time during the evening were identifying themselves with Willy, for while in some respects he was an abnormal character, in one respect he reflected ourselves. He wanted to be liked. He put great emphasis on social acceptance. For him, social acceptance was the guarantee of financial success as well as of prestige. Remember what his words were to his sons:

"I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me, for instance, I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here!" That's all they have to know, and I go right through"...

Granted - underneath Willy Loman's desire to be well liked was a fierce competitiveness. What he was really after was to come out at the top, and this is what he wanted for his sons, too. But going back to this matter of wanting to be liked, nearly every normal person wants to be liked, wants approval, acceptance, recognition. There's nothing wrong in itself with that. It is natural to prefer commendation to criticism, popularity to ostracism. The second clause of the commandment which Jesus made fundamental and basic reads: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself". There is a place for proper self-esteem, and this of necessity involves being in happy, harmonious relations with others. The two - liking oneself and being liked - are bound up together. To live with himself, a person has in some degree to like himself and to be liked by others.

DEVELOPMENT This is where, for some people, practical difficulties begin to arise. If because of some defect, poor appearance, or lack of social graces, if because of problems of personality and temperament, if through the neglect or the lovelessness of others they are disliked, unwanted, unpopular, they are certain to be unhappy. There once was a man who was wealthy, prominent, successful in business, yet with certain traits of character that made for antipathy and hostility in practically all his social contacts. He knew that people were not drawn to him, were not fond of him, and while he gave every impression of being self-sufficient and independent, he was secretly and bitterly

frustrated. A pampered little Pekingese dog was shrewd enough to get around him, and he would indulge it with salted almonds. "Believe the little beast likes me" he once remarked. "He's always looking at me". It was cupboard love, but it gave him the sensation which of all others he most lacked - that of being liked for his own sake. Pathetic - is it not. And yet it's a story that many of us could support from experiences we have had with people. And I'm sure that if we knew all of the attending circumstances in such cases, we would be more compassionate than we are. Criticism of such people is like striking a wounded animal desperately in need of care and affection. They want to love and be loved, but they don't know how to do the one or to win the other.

WHAT PEOPLE WILL DO TO BE LIKED

Consider for a few moments some of the things that people will occasionally do in order to be liked. There are those who will fawn on those whose friendship or favor they covet, will shower praise or attention on them to ingratiate themselves, will be docile, obsequious, servile. Polonius, in Shakespeare's Hamlet, was such a person:

Hamlet: Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in the shape of a camel?

Polonius: 'Tis like a camel indeed.

Hamlet: Methinks it is like a weasel.

Polonius: It is back'd like a weasel.

Hamlet: Or like a whale.

Polonius: Very like a whale.

Worse than this is the fact that to be liked, to secure social acceptance and to find popularity, people will compromise with principle. They conform to subtle but strong group pressures. They allow themselves to be persuaded that in adhering to certain convictions and standards they are not being courageous but are simply being stubborn. For example, young men and women who have no inclination to drink hard liquor or to adopt a free and easy attitude in the matter of sex begin to feel that abstinence on their part will be construed as a criticism and condemnation of those who are unhampered by inhibitions on either score. They lower their own standards in order to gain popular approval.

John F. Kennedy tells us that when he first entered Congress he was told, "The way to get along is to go along". His comment in that connection merits quotation:

"Perhaps if the American people more fully comprehended the terrible pressures which discourage acts of political courage, which drive a Senator to abandon or subdue his conscience, then they might be less critical of those who take the easier road - and more appreciative of those still able to follow the path of courage. Americans want to be liked, and Senators are no exception. We enjoy the comradeship and approval of our friends and colleagues. We prefer praise to abuse, popularity to contempt. Realizing that the path of the conscientious insurgent most frequently is a lonely one, we are anxious to get along with our fellow legislators, our fellow members of the

club, to abide by the clubhouse rules and patterns, not to pursue a unique and independent course which would embarrass or irritate the other members."

What the President was saying, and it was the theme of his book, Profiles in Courage, was that it takes stamina to adhere to principles, to keep one's standards, to be ready if need be to face criticism and ridicule and ostracism.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THEY ARE NOT LIKED

Suppose we consider, too, what happens or what people

will do when they are not liked, when they are unwanted and lonely. The positive course would be to try to discover the reason, to find out what is wrong, what the defects of temperament or character are, or what the quirks of personality are that make for unpopularity. However, generally speaking, this positive course of action is not taken. As a matter of fact, people can be very unconscious of or oblivious to such personality defects. We do not see ourselves as clearly as we sometimes see our neighbors. If we are vain, or petty, or dogmatic, or priggish we are usually the last to realize it. The sharp critic, the gossip, the bore, the prima donna are often unaware of why people may tend to pass them by. And being cold shouldered, they frequently reimburse themselves with a double dose of self-esteem and become all the harder to get along with. Several years ago I had a lady coming in to see me every now and then who had some real problems in relating herself to other people. After one thirty minute session it was quite obvious as to why she couldn't get along with others, as to why many did not like her, but I discovered in talking to her that she had a fantasy of herself and in her own words considered herself "a sweet delicate little thing, with so loveable a disposition". She couldn't understand why people did not like her. We do not see ourselves as clearly as we sometimes see our friends and neighbors.

Or it can work the other way. Those who are unsought, shunned and avoided, made to feel of no account, are as likely to give way to self-depression as they are to reimburse themselves by a double dose of self esteem. An adolescent girl, no plainer than the average, turned from her mirror crying, "I'm so ugly. I'm so gosh awful ugly." Anyone who works with people knows how common it is for folk of every age to have disparaging feelings about themselves, and the more so if they have come in any sense to think of themselves as outsiders. Not being liked by others, they cease to like themselves. They are plagued with feelings of inferiority.

FACE THE FACTS ABOUT OURSELVES

What we all need - for there is something for all of us here -

is to face the facts about ourselves, what we are and what we can and cannot do. We do not have to hide our inadequacies or build up our capabilities unrealistically. God does not ask any one of us to do more than be ourselves - our real, true, best selves. Jesus, it should be remembered, revered men and women, and insisted that they should reverence themselves. We are to be self-respecting individuals. Thank God for your individuality, for your gifts whether small or great. Try to realize your value to God and to your fellowman. And remember that when God made you, He broke the mold.

Ask yourself seriously this question: who are the people who are really liked. Dale Carnegie's book notwithstanding, they are not the persons who deliberately set out to win friends and influence people. A woman is never further from charming than when she seeks to charm. A contrived popularity is as shoddy as it is superficial. In most circles there are always those people who manage to maneuver themselves into the limelight and invite attention. They are facile in speech, witty in repartee, always able to match a good story with a better one. Yet with all of their brilliance, we do not like exhibitionists. Dorothy Day in her autobiography says this about one of her own friends:

"Perhaps she was loved because she was so unself-conscious, so interested in others, so ready to hear and discuss all that interested them"

This, it seems to me cuts deep. The people who are really liked get beyond self through love. They are genuinely interested in other people; they have gotten outside of themselves; they treat all whom they meet with chivalry and courtesy; with understanding and compassion; they are quick to appreciate and to encourage. And I think what attracts us to them is their unself-consciousness. For they are as natural, as artless, as humble as lovely flowers.

THIS IS NOT REMOTE FROM OUR RELIGION

Let no one think that this is remote from religion.

It is close to the beating heart of all true religion. Jesus put unvarying emphasis upon it. Go back and read the Gospel. He showed unflinching interest in people. He treated them always with chivalry and courtesy. He was a great encourager, never sparing in offering praise and encouragement. It was a habit with Him to see first in men and women what was likable, where their strengths were. He went about looking for the good in people, and finding it in marvelous ways and in unexpected quarters. He saw in shifty, unstable, unreliable Simon Peter a man capable of becoming solid and dependable as granite rock. He saw in the greedily little Zaccheus, the possibilities of a great and generous life. He saw in Mary Magdalene a woman not yet beyond redemption's point. It was because Jesus enabled men to see what was best in themselves that He did them so much good. Those who make us feel hopeless or useless or wicked do not render us a service. If only they knew it, they merely confirm in us our own discouraged opinion of ourselves. But those who like us can get anything out of us.

And therein was the secret of Christ's power. Flippant women and unprincipled men felt constrained to say about Him: "This man likes us, believes in us, sees something redeemable in us, does not treat us as the flotsam and jetsam of humanity" He liked them into liking themselves. And what he did for them he has done for countless others across the centuries of time. By personal influence He brought out what was finest in them and stamped his own likeness on them: "But to all who received Him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God"

LET US PRAY: