

## "RULING ONE'S SPIRIT"

TEXT: "He who rules his spirit is greater than he who takes a city"  
(Proverbs 16:32)

### INTRODUCTION

One of the movies we saw while on vacation in Maine was "Gone With The Wind". My wife and I had both seen it before....many years ago. Seeing it again brought to mind a passage in the book that helps to lead into today's sermon. At the funeral of Gerald O'Hara, the prospective son-in-law is speaking. These are his words:

"There warn't nothing that come to him from the outside that could lick him. He warn't scared of the English government when they wanted to hang him. He just lit out and left home. And when he come to this country and was pore, that didn't scare him a mite either. He went to work and he made his money. And when the war come on and his money begun to go, he warn't scared to be pore again. And when the Yankess come through Tara and might of burnt him out or killed him, he warn't faxed a bit and he warn't licked neither. He just planted his front feet and stood his ground. That's why I say he had our good points. There ain't nothing from the outside that can lick any good rebel.

But he had our failings, too - 'cause he could be licked from the inside. I mean to say that what the whole world couldn't do, his own heart could. All you all and me are like him, too. We got the same weaknesses and failings. There ain't nothing that walks can lick us any more than it could lick him...not Yankees, nor carpetbaggers, nor hard times, nor high taxes, nor even downright starvation. But that weakness that's in our hearts can lick us in the time that it takes to bat your eye...."

And how true it is! Many of our difficulties and failures in life are apt to be the result of inner collapse rather than outward pressure. As someone has pointed out to us: "Life is a grindstone and whether it grinds a man down or polishes him up depends on the stuff that he's made of".

As the text puts it: "He who rules his spirit is greater than he who takes a city". Ruling's one's spirit....it's a key to success in life and it's also the door to failure. One may ask: how does one go about cultivating and developing this matter of ruling one's spirit? What are the guidelines that we ought to follow, the areas to which we should give concern? Let me put three suggestions before you in connection with this that may prove to be helpful.

### BE HONEST ENOUGH TO ACCEPT YOUR- SELF AS YOUR OWN BIGGEST PROBLEM

The first suggestion is the most difficult one of all: be honest enough to accept yourself as your own biggest problem. This may sound a little bold, but suppose we think about it for a few minutes. Perhaps a story will help to illustrate the sort of thing I wish to underscore.

It seems that there was a baker living in a small village just outside of Quebec who bought the butter he used from a farmer living in the same neighborhood. One day this baker became somewhat suspicious about the amount of butter he was re-

ceiving from the farmer. He was suspicious that it was not the proper weight. He kept his eye on the weight of that butter for several days, and discovered that he was right. It was getting smaller and smaller. Finally he decided that it was time to act, and so he had the farmer arrested for dishonest dealing. At the trial, the judge was surprised when the farmer told him he had scales, but had no weights with which to weight the butter. And so the judge then asked him what he used for weight. The farmer explained it in these words:

"When the baker began to buy butter from me, I thought I would get my bread from him. I get a one pound loaf and I use it as the weight for my butter. If the weight of the butter is wrong, then he's to blame....."

The story has a simple point. So often when we're dishonest with ourselves, all of life seems to turn against us and so much appears to go wrong with our own little world. I think it could be said that there are times when we're apt to be our own worst enemies. We stand in our own way.

And this, too. There's a tendency at such times to place the blame for many of our troubles on our environment. We're apt to lash out and accuse those we live with and work with for causing us frustration and unhappiness. We blame others; we seldom put the blame upon ourselves. This summer while driving through some of the backwoods roads of Maine, I was reminded of the story of the old New England farmer who was having a hard time driving his wagon along the road. It was really tough going. He called to a man by the side of the road: "How much longer does this hill last?" The man looked at him and said, "Hill...mister, there's no hill". "The trouble is that your back wheels have come off".

Many times the trouble is apt to be with ourselves and not with the road we're traveling. If we want to live successfully with ourselves and with others, then we must be willing to face ourselves and deal with our faults. It was Kierkegaard who said:

"A genuine religious personality is always mild in his judgement of others, and only in his relation to himself is he cold and strict as the master inquisitor".

We must first of all learn to do business with our own hearts. The inner conflicts and battles need to be resolved. We need to remember that no man is defeated until he is defeated inside. And this is where our Christian faith plays a major part. No man is on good terms with himself until he is on good terms with God. E. Stanley Jones use to put it this way: "Get the center right and the circumference will take care of itself". Harmony within brings harmony without.

BE MATURE ENOUGH TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN ACTS

responsibile for your own actions.

A second suggestion that may be helpful to some and which all of us, I'm sure, need to be reminded of from time to time is: be mature enough to be

Lawrence Kimpton, Chancellor of the University of Chicago, was quoted in a speech some time back as saying:

"It has been my observation that character is formed and maturity is won by solving one's own problems without outside help. Show me a man without problems and I'll show you a dull man indeed."

In the same speech, he went on to say that we need to develop more self-reliance, independence, and initiative. He cautioned us against a race of "leaners" - of people, that is, who can't stand on their own two feet and fight their own battles.

Along this same line, I was interested to review recently an article by Dr. Robert McMurrary, a psychological consultant, who made an extensive study of 220 "half failures". He examined the background of these people in order to determine why they had failed to make a real go of it in life. All of these "half failures" were able bodied, intelligent and well trained people. But they were only partially successful. The main reason why they failed rested in the fact that they had not learned how to handle responsibility. In their youth, they were protected from the consequences of their own short comings by indulgent parents. In their work, they blamed their failures on office politics. Critical of their associates, they blamed others for their own mistakes. They sulked if they couldn't have their own way.

I think we would all agree that the dignity of the individual is the very essence of Christianity. That dignity is cultivated and strengthened as we meet life head on. The sheltered and protected life is sometimes a misleading illusion. Efforts to relieve individuals from the consequences of their own actions are harmful to character and responsible living.

I'm sure that God never meant for life to be coddled. It is in struggle that stamina comes. As we rise up and meet adversity do we come to know our strength. The Christian finds life rich, exciting, and full of satisfaction as he faces his duty, speaks his piece, stands his ground and plays his part as a mature, free man upon the stage of life. For he who rules his spirit and may we add - and who is responsible for his own acts - is greater than he who takes a city.

BE WISE ENOUGH TO CONTROL YOUR OWN THOUGHTS

And then the third suggestion.

All of us can do a better job at controlling our own thoughts. Here, too, is something that demands discipline, inner self-control, patience and understanding. But if we learn the art of controlling our thoughts, we're on the road to success.

I don't know how many of you read Guide Posts, but if you do, you may remember that some time back they had an interesting story about R. L. Williams, President of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. The story told of an event that happened during the early days of his first job with the railroad. He was promoted at the age of 17 to the ticket window, and although just a boy, he felt pretty important standing behind the window. He began to develop some high and mighty thoughts of his own self-importance and along with this also developed some brusque, sarcastic and impatient ways with the customers. One day he tried this approach on a man at the window. The man leaned across the counter and said to him:

"You'll have to be courteous, son, if you expect to get anywhere. You're going to need friends and a smart aleck like you makes nothing but enemies. Get wise to yourself".

And so young Williams began experimenting with controlling his temper and thoughts. It was something of a pose at first, but then it became a habit. It seemed to work. Only as we learn to control our thoughts will we wear well and long with others.

We can shape events by controlling our thinking. We can manage life by learning to control it from within. Call it mind over matter, if you will. In a sense, that's what it is. And it works in many areas of life. It's true in the area of health. Whatever our ailments may be, our faith, our inner attitude of mind goes a long way toward making life much healthier.

We recognize, of course, that there are some things we can't do very much about. But when our minds control the things we can control, then the things we can't control don't seem to matter very much. Here's the way one wise man put it:

"You can't control the length of your life, but you can control its width and depth. You can't control the contour of your countenance, but you can control the expression. You can't control the other fellow's opportunities, but you can grasp your own. You can't control the weather, but you can control the moral atmosphere which surrounds you. You can't control the distance that your head shall be above the ground, but you can control the height of the contents of your mind. You can't control the other fellow's annoying habits, but you can see to it that you yourself do not develop or harbor provoking propensities. You can't control hard times or rainy days, but you can bank money now to boost you through both. Why spend your time worrying about things you can't control? Get busy controlling things that depend on you"

The power of thought. We ought not to overlook it. Emerson reminds that a man is what he thinks about all day long. Milton summed it up in this fashion:

"He who reigns within himself and rules his passions, desires, and fears is more than a king".

And what was true long ago in the days of Solomon when the proverbs were written is still true even today: "He who rules his spirit, is greater than he who takes a city".

PRAYER Help us, O God, never to be satisfied with ourselves. Give us the insight that we need to evaluate our inner life.....to see ourselves as our own biggest problem, to be mature enough to assume responsibility for our own actions, and the strength to control our thoughts.

Then, lead us out of our little lives into the greater world of service and understanding. We ask this in the spirit of Christ. Amen