

## "THE FEAR OF WHAT IS HIGH"

### INTRODUCTION

One of the best known of the parables of Jesus is the one that was read by Mr. Ridout earlier in the service - the Parable of the Prodigal Son. You're familiar with its general theme. Over the years I've used it as a spring board for a number of sermons. Reading it recently, however, I found something in it that had never occurred to me before - a new thought, a new twist to one section of it. I suppose this is how it is with great literature. We can go back to it; it never grows stale. It keeps yielding up new treasure to the reader.

### DEVELOPMENT

When the Prodigal Son in the far country came to himself and realized what a fool he had been, he resolved in his mind:

"I will arise and go to my Father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son - make me as one of thy hired servants"

It was that last phrase - "make me as one of thy hired servants" - that offered a new idea. I had always taken this phrase to be a genuine expression of the sincerity of the young man's repentance, proof of his regret and shame and as such - creditable. But I wonder if this was all that he had on his mind, all that he meant? Human motives, to be sure, are curiously mixed. There was humility in his resolve, but there was also something else reflected in this statement, something less creditable.

### WEARY OF RESPONSIBILITY

Perhaps I am reading more into this than one has any right to, but I would suggest that he was weary of responsibility and was content to settle for a lower position. As a matter of fact, he almost gives the impression of preferring it. Having abused his freedom, he was now prepared to renounce it. "Make me as one of thy hired servants".

You see, there had been a time when his freedom was the one thing he had sought - freedom from his father, from all of the parental ties, from routine, from restraint, from the stuffiness of his home. And this desire had taken him into the far country where he had been on his own and had done exactly as he pleased. He had claimed full freedom before he was really mature enough to handle it. How often this happens. In no time at all he was seduced, soiled, his life a shambles. Then, as so often happens, came the rebound. "Make me as one of thy hired servants". He had wanted to be independent, accountable only to himself. Now, tired of responsibility, having made a mess of things and not willing to stay and fight it out, he was persuading himself that the man who is a hired servant has one advantage - that of not having to make decisions for himself, think for himself, stand on his own two feet.

Yes, his self-confidence had been badly shaken. Having made a mess of it all, he was now at the place where he was ready to return home and welcome strict supervision and control. Yes - he would go back home, make a clean breast of everything to his father, tell him what he had found out about himself and life and suggest that he be treated as a workman about the place. Yes - this he would prefer. "Make me as one of thy hired servants". He was weary of responsibility and was content to settle for a low position in the order of things. He didn't have the courage to strike out for something higher.

### WE SEE IT IN LIFE TODAY

Now what I have been talking about thus far happened a long time ago - and yet, it's as fresh as this morning's newspaper. It happens today and it happens in different areas. The lure of the lower position - where the demands are few and the security is great - has great appeal. I once knew a young man who was so unsure of himself and of his ability to hold a job that when he saw a garbage collector at work one day a voice inside of him said:

"Now, if the worst comes to the worst, you can always get a job doing that". And this was a young man who by training and preparation should have had his sights set on things higher. People who have lost confidence in themselves, made a mess of things perhaps, living in a far country of one kind or another - frightened by the thought of personal responsibility. Badgered by self-distrust, they would rather be under authority than on their own. Students in the university sometimes acquire feelings of this sort. Some postpone with more and more graduate study that frightful day when they will have to leave the cloistered ivory tower existence where they have been under the authority of professors and academic schedules and requirements to go out, as they say, into the cold, cruel world and be on their own. It's a real feeling. There comes a time when it's good to shake up the next and get them out of the roost. How well I remember having this feeling at the end of eight years of college and graduate study. Why the thought of going out into the world and running a church and carrying the full responsibility was frightening. And I'm sure it was just as frightening to the church and the congregation to which I was appointed.

This "hired servant" attitude is not altogether a good thing. Whether it comes about through "weariness of responsibility" or a fear of what is high - it is not good, and it can thwart human fulfillment and stifle forward movements and gear life to lower levels rather than lifting life to new levels of achievement and accomplishment. Suppose we look at this attitude as it operates in several areas.

#### POLITICAL LIFE

Consider the political life of nations and yes, even cities. Because life today is problem ridden, complex, complicated and because individuals feel themselves helpless on account of the colossal scale of the influences at work in the world - weariness of responsibility is widespread. And it can lead to all sorts of dangers in politics, not the least of which is mediocrity, and unimaginative, lackluster, dispirited political leadership.

It can open the door to totalitarianism. Democracy, mind you, carries with it certain obligations, and if individual citizens are not willing to actively follow through on those obligations - to know the issues, to know the candidates and what they stand for, to get out and work to get candidates elected, and to go to the polls and vote - then they have only themselves to blame for the mess and muddle things get in to. When citizens sit back, abjure personal responsibility, become "yes" men, the door is then open to demagoguery, dictatorship, and the deep intrenchment of one political party with all of its dangers.

I say this, of course, with some reference to the political life of this city, and the forthcoming election. New York City has increasingly become a dispirited city. We seem content to settle for a low position in the order of things, and it need not be this way. If enough people care and care sufficiently, something can be done. Never before in these twenty years have the voters, weary of the mediocrity fostered by one-party rule, had such an opportunity to break with the past and start over. Let us strike out for something higher.

#### RELIGIOUS LIFE

And certainly what is true in the political realm holds true in the religious realm. Many have difficulty in thinking things through for themselves, and keeping abreast of developments in religious thought. In many instances, what the shepherd of the flock says, the faithful sheep quickly take up and digest. Weariness of personal responsibility in thinking things through and arriving at one's own faith, ~~instead of~~ building a life solely on an "inherited" faith - this is not at all uncommon.

Take, for example, the advent of the space age and its implications for our belief about God and man, heaven and hell, society and the destiny of the race. A book like Bishop Robinson's "Honest to God" which deals with such questions stimulated and

prodded the thinking of many Christians. At most though, they are a minority. Where faith and morals are concerned, the majority are not thinking things through for themselves and show no inclination to make a start. Off in a far country, they have cast their obligations to one side.

Therefore I raise this question in your minds: how much first hand thinking do you give to the Christianity you profess. Religiously, in what category would you place yourself: the literate or the illiterate? When did you last read a book about the Christian faith. For that matter, when did you last read the Bible? And did you read it with any thoroughness, relating what you read to life. Does it get from you the same care you devote to the journals of your profession? Do you read it with the same regularity as you read the daily quotations of the stock market? Weariness of responsibility is widespread in matters of religion - in terms of acquiring one's own faith and accepting your faith as a sort of second hand thing, something your parents thought you ought to get as you were growing up.

AGE A FACTOR Age frequently is a factor in this connection. There's a sentence in the book of Ecclesiastes which has a bearing on this plea of the Prodigal Son to remain a hired servant. The writer, describing advancing years and how they affect some, observed: "They are afraid of what is high".

I take him to mean that the problem as we grow older is not physical decline - that's inevitable. The real problem is what happens to our attitude of life. When all is said and done, age is a quality of mind and a matter of maturity. It has to do far more with character, conduct, citizenship than with birthdays and calendars. From childhood to the grave, life faces us with challenges and new sets of problems. We thrive and grow a rich soul if we respond affirmatively to those challenges. Once we lose zest, grow weary in well-doing, become tired of carrying responsibility, sit back and let others do what we should be doing ourselves, once we become afraid of what is high and ask to be hired servants who do only what they have to, we're finished on the inside and we're writing the final chapter. There are people who are through at thirty. There are people, on the other hand, full of initiative and enthusiasm and eager to take on obligations, who at eighty years have the secret of perpetual youth. And how we admire them and their attitude.

MATTERS OF TRUTH AND RIGHTNESS Let me ask you this: have you acquired over the years the "hired servant" attitude - afraid of change, afraid of what is high? What is your attitude toward truth? Do you keep an open mind, a questioning mind in matters religious, political, matters that relate to social conditions today. Or is it pretty well a closed mind? A mind that fails to see other sides of a problem or a question. Do you do your own thinking and value the right of private judgment, refusing on occasion to be a conformist. Do you let others do all your thinking, or do you have some opinions of your own. What is your attitude toward truth. When the controversy over evolution was at its height Charles Kingsley said, "God's orthodoxy is truth. If Darwin speaks the truth, he is orthodox". For a clergyman to talk like that at that time took courage. It is a sad thing when a teacher, a preacher, or a politician is driven to confess, "That is true, but I dare not say it". Again, the "hired servant" attitude. Content to settle for a lower order of things.

Another question: what is your attitude to what you know to be right. Are you on Monday what you profess to be on Sunday. Everybody abhors hypocrisy. The person who does not live up to his beliefs we label a hypocrite. I wonder if there is not even a blacker kind of hypocrisy, namely that of a person who not only does not live up to his beliefs, but doesn't even try. He doesn't have the courage to strike out for higher ground. Content to settle for something less.

What I am emphasizing is that the road to responsible citizenship, to Christian sonship is hard and steep. It makes little appeal to the "hired servant" attitude and approach to life. Those who have grown weary and who are afraid of what is high have no stomach for it. Think of what it calls for: doing to others as you would have them do unto you, treating every human being regardless of his class or the color of his skin as a child of God with sacred inalienable rights - good housing, good schools, fair job opportunities, an open, free society. Think about it; ~~it is demanding of us~~. It points to high ground. And those with the hired servant attitude will have none of it, will cynically shrug their shoulders at the mention of it, but responsible citizens, free spirits, sons and daughters of God will rise to it.

Yes, the Prodigal had planned to say to his father on his return home, "Make me as one of thy hired servants". The words were brushed aside. When father and son met, the past was forgiven, blotted out; shame, self-disgust, weariness of responsibility were forgotten, were all swallowed up in love. Hired service could only have meant the loss of independence, end of liberty, decay of selfhood. It would have resulted in mediocrity, life geared to low levels. Sonship means trust, confidence, partnership, life geared to high levels. Remember God is the Father of us all. And in his sight we are more than servants - sons and daughters. Where do you fit in all of this. In a sense you have a choice....to respond as the "hired servant" or "child of God". For,

"To every man there openeth a way, and ways and a way.

The high souls climbs the high way,  
The low soul gropes the low.

And in between on the misty flats the rest drift to and from,  
But to every man there openeth a high way and a low,  
And every man decideth the way his shoul shall go"

LET US PRAY

Our prayer, O God, is a silent searching of our own hearts and minds and consciences. Help us to lay these things to heart and help us to put the past behind us, and pour all our energies into the race that lies before us, keeping our eyes always steadfastly on him who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Amen