

"THE KEY TO SUCCESS"

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

INTRODUCTION

There's an interesting passage in "Gone With the Wind" which I should like to share with you for it helps to lead into the main thought of 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 Yankees come through Tara and might of burnt him out or killed him, he warn't fazed 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...."

How true! How true it is that many of our difficulties and failures in life are the result of inner collapse rather than outward pressure. Someone has pointed out to us that "Life is a grindstone and whether it grinds a man down or polishes him up depends on the stuff that he's made of". To learn to live with one's self - this is one of the important lessons that one has to learn in life. As it says in the Book of Proverbs: "He who rules his spirit is greater than he who takes a city". Ruling one's spirit - this is the key to success, and at the same time it is also the door to failure.

The question that faces us is HOW. How does one learn to rule his spirit? How does one go about cultivating and developing this art of living with one's self. Let me offer three suggestions that may be helpful.

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

yourself as your own biggest problem.

The first suggestion is the most difficult one of all - be honest enough to accept Now this may sound a little

bold, but suppose we think about it for a few moments. Perhaps a story will help to illustrate what is in my mind.

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 the baker became somewhat suspicious about the amount of butter he was receiving from the farmer. He was suspicious that it was not the proper weight. He kept his eye on the weight of the 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 weigh 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 point. Isn't it true that when we're dishonest with ourselves, all of life seems to turn against us and everything appears to go wrong with our world. Isn't it true that there are times when we're our own worst enemies. We stand in our own way.

And I think it's true, too, that we tend to place the blame for many of our troubles on our own environment. We're apt to accuse those we live with and work with for causing us frustration and unhappiness. A great deal of the time, however, we should be placing the blame where it really belongs - on ourselves. Some of you may have heard the story of the Vermont 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".

So many times the trouble is apt to be with ourselves and not with the road we're travelling. 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 Kierregard who said:

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

We must first of all then learn to do business with our own hearts. We must resolve those inner conflicts and battles. We must remember that no one is defeated until he is defeated inside. This is where our Christian faith begins to play a part. No man is on good terms with himself until he is on good terms with God. E. Stanley Jones use to say: "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

A second suggestion that may be helpful to some is this: be mature enough to be responsible for your own actions.

Lawrence Kimpton, the Chancellor of the University of Chicago, several years ago was quoted 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....."

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

Along this same line, Dr. Robert McMurray, a psychological consultant, 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 shortcomings 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 agree that the dignity of the individual is the very essence of Christianity. That dignity is cultivated only 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. When a life is underwritten, it tends to become soft.

God never meant for life to be coddled. It is only in struggle that stamina comes. Only as we rise up and meet adversity, do we come to know our own strength. When things are made too easy for us, life falls apart. 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 now a third suggestion. We need to learn to do a better job at controlling our own thoughts.

This, too, demands a great deal of us - discipline, inner self-control, patience, understanding - but if we learn how to control our thoughts, we're on the road to success.

Sometime ago Guide Posts had an interesting story about R. L. Williams, the President of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. He tells about 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. Although just a boy, he felt pretty important. He began to have some high and mighty thoughts concerning his own self-importance. He developed the habit of being brusque, sarcastic and tough on the customers. One day he tried this approach on a travelling salesman. 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."

So young Williams began experimenting with controlling his temper and his 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 actually 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. That's what it is. The idea works in many areas of life. Take the matter of health. Several years ago I had the funeral of a man who was in his 80th year. His widow mentioned that he had never suffered from sickness during his entire lifetime. For some reason an autopsy was performed. His lungs showed tuberculosis scars. His stomach showed signs of long forgotten ulcers. His arteries were hardened. His kidneys showed damage. The widow explained it all by saying that whenever he felt out of sorts, he always practiced some positive thinking. Whatever our ailments, our faith, our inner attitude of mind goes a long way toward making life much healthier.

I know there are some things that 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 faults, 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. Don't overlook it. Emerson once said: "A man is what he thinks about all day long". Milton summed it up in these words: "He who reigns within himself and rules his passions, desires and fears is more than a king". Pygmy thoughts make pygmy men. Great thoughts make great men.

What was true in Solomon's day is still true today: "He who rules his spirit, is greater than he who takes a city".

LET US PRAY:

Help us never to be satisfied with ourselves,
O God. Enable us to have the courage and
insight on occasion to see ourselves as our own biggest problem.
Help us to be mature enough to be responsible for our own acts.
Give us the strength to control our thoughts at all times, and
then lead us out of our little lives into the greater world of
service and understanding. We ask these things in the spirit of
Jesus Christ who ruled his spirit at all times. Amen