

## "THE MEANS AND THE ENDS OF LIFE"

TEXT: "...I am the way....no man cometh unto the Father,  
but by me...." (John 14: 6)

INTRODUCTION There is a great deal of muddled thinking about the means and the ends of life - the goals we want to reach and the ways we take to reach them. Here, on this road of life, we are all going somewhere. Whether we plan it or not, whether we know it or not, the years are taking us somewhere. With every tick of the clock we are moving toward some destination. But some of our goals are not worth getting to and some are ruined by the ways we use to try to reach them. And some good ends we deeply desire are never reached because we don't take the means to get there.

Means and ends! It's at this place that our human problems are really complicated, good and evil mixed in them like the tares and the wheat Jesus was talking about in His parable. We need some Socrates to come among us. You'll remember that he walked the streets of Athens asking questions, puncturing pretensions, accusing his contemporaries of spending their lives in the pursuit of goals they never critically examined as to whether they were worth getting to. "The unexamined life" he once said, "is not worth the living".

DEVELOPMENT I fear there is much in our modern life that is "unexamined" life. We don't know where we're going...many of us...we're just on our way somewhere, like Alice in Wonderland. You remember how she asked the cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" And the cat answered, "That depends a good deal on where you want to go". "Oh, I don't much care". "Then it doesn't matter much which way you go". "But" insisted Alice, "I want to get somewhere". "Oh" the cat answered, "you are sure to do that".

So here on this first Sunday of a New Year - of a new decade - I want to ask you some questions about the ends of life and the means of life. Where are you going? What ends do you have in view? Just where do you want off and how do you propose to get there? I'm not sure that we'll clear up all the confusion about means and ends, but at least we may see more clearly where the goalposts are.

MAGNIFICENT MEANS TO ACHIEVE TRIVIAL ENDS Consider first this observation: the use of magnificent means to achieve evil or trivial ends. How much of that there is: big means for small ends.

A hundred years ago Henry David Thoreau baptized it with a fitting name. He sat in his haven at Walden Pond watching linesmen put up wires along the tracks of the Fitchburg Railway, and upon inquiry was told that it was this new thing called the "telegraph" - which would link the state of Maine with the state of Texas and enable people to talk to each other across the continent. Unimpressed, he asked:

"But what if the people of Maine have nothing to say to the people of Texas, and the people of Texas have nothing to answer to the people of Maine?"

Then he came up with the devastating comment which has more or less characterized every mechanical advancement since. "We're improving the means" he said, "for reaching unimproved ends". It would be hard to find a more penetrating appraisal of our whole, noisy, technological civilization, and much in it that we have gloried

in as progress. It is mostly means - improved means, unimproved ends.

For instance, how marvelously we have improved the means of communication - from telegraph to telephone to television and all these wonderful tele-things. But there has been no commensurate improvement in what we have to say. We've made wonderful advances, too, in the means of transportation. Certainly, today, we get where we want to go much faster.

"Inventions add new speed to life,  
We move much faster through the air;  
Our ships and cars and aeroplanes  
All hurl us faster on - but WHERE?"

And what for? To what end? This disease of the outer world civilization is symptomatic of an inner sickness. How many people today are putting major energies into the pursuit of goals that aren't worth getting to. Suppose you ask yourself the question: What for? These things I'm putting into life....are they worth anything? In the sight of God, are they worth what it's costing me to get them?

So often as I watch people feverishly trying to get somewhere, I'm reminded of a story about a city lawyer who bought a saddle horse from a farmer. The farmer agreed to sell the horse, provided the lawyer could catch it. The lawyer took his two sons into the pasture and, after three hours, they managed to corral the horse and put a bridle on him. The farmer being meticulously honest said:

"There are two things I have to tell you about this horse before I take your money. In the first place, he's awful hard to ketch". (Well the man had discovered that.!) "The second thing" said the farmer with a wink at his wife, "He's not worth a durn when you've ketched him".

A lot of things in this world are like that - hard to catch. If you get them it will mean hard work - long hours, splendid self-denial. But when you get them you won't have much. The end of life - it's important. If you get where you're going, where will you be?

#### DESIRABLE ENDS BUT CORRUPTED MEANS

Now move on to a second phase of this matter. Turn the problem around. Consider the many good, worthwhile and desirable ends that get corrupted through the means by which we seek to reach them. This, perhaps, is the most subtle of all human temptations, the temptation of the shortcut. I venture that much of the misery we pile up for ourselves comes out of it - not of choosing the wrong goals, but of choosing wrong roads to right ones.

So often in our hurry to get where we want to go quickly, we are inclined to be impatient with slow means, old-fashioned rules, more Christian ways of getting there. So we begin to rationalize the shortcut and entertain the plausible idea that it is quite all right to sheat or cut a corner if it is a good cause we're cheating for. Political leaders will tell you about all the wrong things they have to do to get a right thing done. International diplomats proceed on the accepted assumption that for the welfare of the country you have to lie and deceive to protect the national interest.

A representative of a church said before a gambling referendum in a nearby state, "What's so evil about gambling if it benefits the church?" And so we play around with the old, familiar doctrine that the ends are supposed to justify the means and never do.

It is the most plausible of all human illusions: if it is a good end you are after, it is permissible, in fact desirable, to do a wrong thing to get there. The end is important, never mind how you get there. Get there - the end will justify the means.

And it is a lie. Jesus in His temptation in the wilderness saw it for what it really was - a lie of the devil. His temptation turned on this very thing. The Russian writer, Dostoyevsky, thought that the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness were the essence and epitome of human history. Look carefully at them. All were temptations to take some kind of shortcut to the Kingdom of God, to do evil that good might come, to do a wrong thing for a right reason. So plausible it was, Jesus said, it was a temptation. And he would not bow to it. He came out with the clear, unclouded perception that if you want to get where God is, you have to take God's way to it. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God - him only thou shalt serve."

By this time we should have learned that bit of wisdom because of all generations in history we have witnessed the progressive, consistent illusion of the shortcut. When Jesus said: "I am the way. No man cometh to the Father but by me" - He was talking about means - the way to arrive. The shortcut never does. For when you get where you want to go you find the means have become the ends, and you don't have the thing you started out for.

We are like the little boy playing on the lawn, who saw a butterfly flit from bush to bush. He was content to watch it for a while, fascinated by its graceful beauty. Then the idea got into his head that it would be nice to catch, to keep it for himself. So when it alighted softly on a flower, he crept up and grabbed it in his hand. But then he found he didn't have it, at least he didn't have the beautiful thing he had reached for. All he had in his open hand was an ugly smear and a crushed skeleton of wings. The means of life - they are important. If you get where you're going, where will you be?

THE MEANS TO REACH HIGH ENDS: RESOLUTIONS: Come finally now, to consider the high ends we deeply desire and often miss simply because we didn't take any means to reach them - New Year resolutions, for instance.

The making of New Year resolutions has been the target of a good deal of good natured ridicule. As someone said, "they just go in one year and out the other". We joke about it, I suppose, because it reveals so clearly the wide gap between our intentions and our actions - meaning well and doing well.

It's so easy to make a wish, set our hearts on something, deeply resolve to be something or do something, then fool ourselves into thinking that because that is our desire, therefore it is our goal. But the fact is, there is no use choosing a good end, or any end, unless we choose the day by day means that get us there. Where are you going now? That is where you will get. It is what you are doing day-by-day, not what you are dreaming, that determines destination.

Does this mean, then, there is no use in making decisions or resolutions or hoping for a better life? On the contrary, that is one of the divinest elements in our being, that dissatisfaction with ourselves that gives birth to dreams and higher longings. According to the Gallup Poll, the most popular New Year's resolutions center on improving character. And surely that is a Christian impulse - the stirring of God's spirit in us. I think we should welcome any event - an anniversary, a new year, even an illness - that prods us to the faith that we be better people. It is good to dream and set a high and worthy goal.

The trouble isn't in the dream. It is in the road - the means - the way to get there. If you want the destination, then you must be willing to travel the road that leads to it. It is a road that involves work and sacrifice. Good intentions are not enough.

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, 'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown'. And he replied, 'Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than a light and safer than a known way' So I went forth and, finding the hand of God strode gladly into the night, and He led me toward the hills and the breaking of dawn in the lone east."

LET US PRAY

O God Eternal, whose love is unfailing, at the beginning of another year we praise Thee that our times are controlled by Thee.

We praise Thee for Thy goodness and mercy which has followed us.

We thank Thee for failures and sorrows Thou didst weave into a pattern of good.

We thank thee for thy forgiveness for things which we should have not have done, and for the opportunity of the new beginning, the fresh start.

Grant that we may show forth our thanks by deepening our loyalty and our obedience to Thee, in our labors and in our leisure, in our laughter and in our tears, in our worship and in our service to others, and above all in our love and devotion to thee.

As we kneel at thy table this hour and receive the bread and wine - strengthen us, O God, to meet whatever may be ahead of us in the days of this new year.

In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray.

"IF YOU GET WHERE YOU'RE GOING, WHERE WILL YOU BE?"

TEXT: "...I am the way....no man cometh unto the  
Father, but by Me"...."

(John 14: 6)

INTRODUCTION In recent months, you and I have been witness to a great deal of muddled thinking regarding the means and the ends of life - the goals people want to reach and the ways they take to reach them.

We're aware that here on this road of life we're travelling, all of us are going somewhere. With every tick of the clock, with every day on the calendar, we are moving toward some destination. However, some of our goals are not worth getting to and some are ruined by the ways we take to reach them.

Means and ends. It's at this place that our human problems are really complicated....good and evil mixed in them like the tares and the wheat that Jesus spoke of. And several centuries before Jesus, a man by the name of Socrates went about the streets of Athens accusing his contemporaries of spending their lives in pursuit of goals they never bothered to examine. Said he, "The unexamined life is not worth living".

DEVELOPMENT Alice in "Alice In Wonderland" asked the cat, "Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?" And the cat replied, "That depends a good deal on where you want to go". "Oh" said Alice, "...I don't much care". "Then it doesn't matter much which way you go". "But" insisted Alice, "I want to get somewhere." "Ah" answered the cat, "you are sure to do that!"

How true it is. We're all going somewhere. So here on this first Sunday of a New Year, it is well for us to pause and consider some fundamental questions regarding the ends and means of our lives. Where are you going? What ends do you have in view? Where do you want to get off? And how do you propose to get there? We may not clear up all the confusion regarding the means and ends of life, but at least I hope that we'll see more clearly where the goalposts are.

MAGNIFICENT MEANS TO ACHIEVE TRIVIAL ENDS Consider, first, this observation:  
the use of magnificent means to  
achieve trivial ends. Big means for small ends. There's a lot of it in our time.

About a hundred years ago, Henry David Thoreau sat in his haven at Walden Pond outside of Boston watching linesmen put up wires along the tracks of the Fitchburg Railway and upon inquiry was told that it was this new thing called the "telegraph" - which would link the state of Maine with the state of Texas and enable people to talk to each other across the continent. Unimpressed, he raised this concern:

"But what if the people of Maine have nothing to say to the people of Texas, and the people of Texas have nothing to answer to the people of Maine?"

And then he came up with the comment which has more or less characterized every mechanical advancement since. He said "We're improving the means for reaching unimproved ends". Improved means, but unimproved ends. His observation provides

us with a penetrating appraisal of our technological society and much in it that we have glorified as progress.

We have done well in improving the means of communication - from telegraph to telephone to television. But one often wonders if there has been any commensurate improvement in what we have to say. We've witnessed wonderful advances in the means of transportation, too.

"Inventions add new speed to life,  
We move much faster through the air;  
Our ships and cars and aeroplanes  
All hurl us faster on - but where?"

And for what? To what end? Certainly the quality of life is not being improved in all of this. Sometimes when I watch people feverishly trying to get somewhere, I'm reminded of a story about a city lawyer who bought a saddle horse from a farmer. The farmer agreed to sell the horse, provided the lawyer could catch it. The lawyer took his two sons in the pasture and after about three hours, they managed to corral the horse and put a bridle on him. The farmer being honest remarked:

"There are two things I have to tell you about this horse before I take your money. In the first place, he's awful hard to catch". (The man had discovered that). "The second thing" said the farmer with a wink at his wife, "He's not worth a darn when you've ketched him".

I'm sure you'll agree that there are a lot of things like that in the world - hard to catch. If you get them, it will mean hard work - long hours, lots of self-denial. But when you get them, you won't have much. The end of life. If you get where you're going, where will you be?

DESIRABLE ENDS / CORRUPTED MEANS

Move on to a second phase of this matter. Turn the problem around. Consider the good and desirable ends that so often get corrupted through the means by which we seek to reach them. It's a subtle temptations, the temptation of the shortcut. Much of the misery we pile up for ourselves comes out of it - not of choosing the wrong goals, but of choosing the wrong road to right goals.

So often in our hurry to get where we want to go, we're inclined to be impatient with slow means, old-fashioned rules of right and wrong. So we begin to rationalize the shortcut and entertain the plausible idea that it is quite all right to cheat or cut a corner if it's a good cause and we don't get caught. Political leaders will tell you about all the wrong things they have to do to get a right thing done. Diplomats proceed on the assumption that for the welfare of the country you have to lie and deceive to protect the national interest. A representative of a church said before a gambling referendum in a nearby state, "What's so wrong about gambling if it benefits the church?" And so we play around with the old and familiar doctrine that the ends are supposed to justify the means and never do!

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RESOLUTIONS / MEANS TO ACHIEVE HIGH ENDS

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Does this mean there is no use in making decisions or resolutions or hoping for a better life? On the contrary, this is one of the divine elements in our being - that measure of dissatisfaction with ourselves that gives birth to dreams and higher longs. Think of it as the stirring of God's spirit in us. I think we should welcome any event - a new year, an anniversary - that prods us to the faith that we can be better people. It is good to dream and to set high and worthy goals, but it is in the road - the means - the way we travel to get there - that we should watch carefully. It is a road that involves work and sacrifice. Good intentions are never enough.

I normally do not end sermons by quoting Dear Abby, but I would like to share with you nine rules for living which she had in her column earlier this week. I

feel they would make an excellent set of New Year's resolutions. She borrowed them from Overeaters Anonymous, paraphrased them and this is the way they read:

1. Just for today I will try to live through this day only, and not set far-reaching goals to try to overcome all my problems at once. I know I can do something for 12 hours that would appall me if I felt I had to keep it up for a lifetime.
2. Just for today I will try to be happy. Lincoln said, "Most folks are about as happy as they make up their minds to be". He was right. I will not dwell on thoughts that depress me. I will chase them out of my mind and replace them with happy thoughts.
3. Just for today I will adjust myself to what is. I will try to change those things I can change and accept those things I cannot".
4. Just for today I will try to improve my mind. I will not be a mental loafer. I will force myself to read something that requires effort, thought, concentration.
5. Just for today I will exercise my soul in three ways: I will do a good deed for somebody - without letting them know it. I will do at least two things that I know I should do, but have been putting off. I will not show anyone that my feelings are hurt; they may be hurt, but today I will not show it.
- 6.