

"THE MENACE OF THE MINUTE"

INTRODUCTION

Back in the nineteen forties, during the early hours of the World Security Conference in San Francisco, the commentators reporting this important event to the rest of the nation were suddenly cut off the air. An immediate investigation revealed that there was no evil conspiracy involved. The trouble was caused by a farmer driving a truck-load of fertilizer in Colorado - some 1400 miles from the Conference. What happened was this. The farmer lost control of the truck with the result that it crashed into a telephone pole, knocking it over and snapping the wires of the radio network. And so it was that the interests of the nation in the efforts for world peace were held up because of an accident to the truck filled with fertilizer fourteen hundred miles East from the Conference Room.

There are those times in life when small, seemingly insignificant things...events cause results far out of proportion to their actual size.

Here's another illustration of this sort of thing, this one from some Bicentennial material that I was reading recently. Thomas Jefferson, as an old man, told about the final signing of the Declaration of Independence. He said that most of the members intended to debate the matter at length before signing. The day set for this debate was hot and humid in Philadelphia. Moreover, through the open doors of the Philadelphia Statehouse came a swarm of flies from a near-by stable. The flies made for the silk-stockinged legs of the delegates. In the confusion and discomfort that followed all thought of lengthy debate was soon forgotten. The members of the Conference, pestered by these horse flies, proceeded with haste to sign their names to this document which was to set up a new nation in America. Yes, how true it is that little things often cause results out of proportion to their actual size. The menace of the minute. Let's think about it here this morning for a little while. Sometimes, it works to our favor..

DEVELOPMENT

Most of us have little difficulty in subscribing to the larger ideals and basic beliefs of our Christian living. We know them and have no quarrel with them. We take pride in our belief in God and in our commitment to the ideal of brotherhood. We have faith in truth and faith in love as a way of life. Likewise, we brace ourselves against the major enemies of life - we build hospitals; we carry insurance; ~~we create armies~~; we take vitamins; we support the government with our taxes.

However, part of our problem rests in the fact that life is often undermined and weakened by those seemingly harmless enemies that quietly invade our lives and sap our strengths and erode our effectiveness. ~~We stand up well against life's larger issues only~~ to fall prey to that careless bit of criticism, the sharp sting of gossip, the prickly irritation, the lustful imagination, the innocent philandering, the little white lie, the borrowed money, the terrible temper, the strain of fruitless worry.

We should be concerned with these things in our personal lives, for often behind the pious fronts we present to the world, these tiny microbes and germs filter in and lay waste our effectiveness. Injuring personality, they become the breeding ground for trouble.

There's an old legend from Arabia in which the Devil presents himself to a man and says, "You are about to die. You can save yourself from death in any

one of three ways: kill your servant, beat your wife, or drink this cup of wine". The man thought for a moment and then said, "To kill my faithful servant is wrong. To beat my lovely wife whom I love is ridiculous. Therefore, I shall drink this cup of wine". The legend tells us that the man became drunk, and while drunk he beat his wife and killed his faithful servant who was trying to protect her. The message behind this legend is simply this: we seldom break at our strongest points! We are betrayed in our weakest moments. One small "defective" trait in a personality often cancels much that is fine and good. ~~More than once the strength of a character has been thwarted by a little careless criticism, wagging tongue, innocent philandering.~~

II.

Taking the next step, then, too, isn't it true that small issues and minute matters can make us insensitive to the real and important concerns or values of life. Again, an illustration to let in the light.

Remember Mr. Bouncer, the American cereal manufacturer, who offered a million dollars to the Pope in return for a favor. The Pope refused even though the Vatican could have sued the money in a number of good ways. One of the Cardinals objected, saying that the million dollars should have been accepted and the favor granted. He asked the Pope why he had turned it down. The Pope said that this American, Mr. Bouncer, had asked him to change two words in the Lord's Prayer. Instead of "Give us this day our daily bread", he wanted it to be, "Give us this day our Bouncer's wheatflakes."

Friends, when you and I become so preoccupied with wheat flakes - or their equivalent - with trivia, with small, insignificant things, we're then in danger of missing out on more important concerns. Jesus was well aware of this tendency on the part of people and challenged them to guard against trivia. Remember the story of Martha and Mary. Martha was concerned with too many little things out in the kitchen. Mary had chosen the good portion, and sat at the foot of our Lord learning from Him. We need to guard against the Martha syndrome in our lives and in the life of our Church.

Joseph Fort Newton in one of his devotional books told about a man who was opposed to a merger of his church with another church. One evening at a church dinner, this objector was talking to a friend sitting next to him. Watching the ladies serve their delicious specialty - hot pop-overs - he said to his friend, "You know, if this merger goes through, we'll never see our ladies serving those pop-overs again!"

I don't know if the merger ever went through. That's not the point right now that concerns us. Too often when it's a choice between "hot buns" or brotherhood, the buns are apt to win out. Little things can often blind our vision to the much greater good that can come about.

RENEW LIFE

Moving on, let's spend some time thinking about the ways that one can meet and master, if you will, the menace of the minute.

I think that when we conscientiously take the time to renew the inner life we are in a better position to cope with the threat of little things. When our bodies and spirits become weak and weary, then it is that we are most susceptible. Most people do not set out deliberately to forget or deny the spiritual side of life. In the hustle and hurry of things, we drop our guard. We become careless in our habits. We become so immersed in the secular press of things that we become indifferent to the things of the spirit. I believe

things are important and what things are unimportant.

LIVE ABOVE As we give greater attention to renewing our inner life, as we strive to maintain our perspective on things...to keep a sense of balance...then, too, in the third and final place, we must make a determined effort to to live above and beyond the reach of the triffling irritations and minor worries that touch all of our lives. If we don't, they're apt to tear us to bits. Unless we learn to develop some fancy footwork and sidestep them, they'll ballon into major problems.

I'm reminded of the blacksmith who offered to shoe a horse for a customer on the basis of 1¢ for the first nail, 2¢ for the second nail, 4¢ for the third, 8¢ for the fourth, 16¢ for the fifth nail...and so on. The owner of the horse, unfamiliar with compound doubling, accepted the bargain, or what he thought was a bargain. And so for eight nails in each shoe, or a total of 32 nails, the bill came to something like \$42,000,000. It's this way with our trivial fears, minor worries. They multiply rapidly if we let them and can end up presenting us with some bills that we cannot pay! So, be careful.

A television director said to some young, aspring actors who had the tendency to emphasize an unimportant sentence or idea, "Throw it away....don't make a thing of it". There are many little things that we tend to "make a thing of"....things we would do well to "throw away". ~~Suppose you don't like what someone said. Throw it away. Don't make a thing of it.~~ Some of us let little things spoil our day. Life is too wonderful to be spoiled by fussing and fretting over little things that in the long run really are unimportant and insignificant.

EXAMPLE OF JESUS The supreme example of balance and proportion in the handling of little things is the man from Nazareth. Jesus knew the importance of little things: coins, candles, mustard seeds. But Jesus, on the other hand, was always telling his followers not to loose themselves in quibbling over the insignificant and inconsequential concerns.

Poise and serenity in the face of criticism was His. He lived close to God. Call it, if you will, a "divine perspective" - but it was this that helped to put everything in its proper place and helped Him to avoid the pitfalls of the picayune....to master the menace of the minute.

With God's power, we resist the little things that are dangerous and destructful. With God's help, we sidestep the little things that are insignificant. With God's wisdom, we respect and we use the little things that are important and help to determine our growth ~~into~~ life's larger challenges. in meeting

PRAYER Help us, O God, in our daily lives to be concerned with the little things that are important; help us to rise above the small irritations that are unimportant. Grant us the wisdom to see the difference between the essentials and non-essentials in the art of effective living. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen

that when we are spiritually and emotionally on "top of things" that we are then able to ward off the germs of the soul and not become the victims of pettiness and trivia. Times of rest and prayer are essential.

The poet has expressed it in these words:

"Too close, life crowds! There is no place to hide.
From feverish days, my heart throbs in my side;
Let us take time, take time;

Let us take time to know the thoughts of men;
Time to know beauty; and time to feel again
Calm and content of soul - the quiet power
Of meditation through a gentle hour
Spent with God!

Time for books, the song, the golden weather.
Made for happiness of friends together;
Time to believe; and time to lift the bars
twixt us and truth, twixt heart beat and the stars
Before our breath is spent, before life's mill
Grinds all too fine. Let us this hour be still
And know our God.

Let us take time. Take time!"

There it is. Part of our trouble is that we don't take time to renew "the inner life" like we should.

PROPORTION AND BALANCE

Then, too, another suggestion would be that we cultivate a sense of proportion or balance which tells us which little things are important and which are not. This word from the Chinese philosopher, Lin Yutang, speaks to me. He writes,

"Besides the noble art of getting things done, there is the noble art of leaving things undone. The wisdom of life consists in the elimination of nonessentials."

Also, we need to remember that when we do take care of the little things that are important, the bigger things will take care of themselves.

Charles Spurgeon told one time of a famous tailor who was about to pass on to the next life. His associates asked him to reveal to them the secret of his success in the tailoring business before it was too late. He agreed to do so and at the appointed hour a large number of his tailoring associate came together in his room to hear his final bit of advice. In a low whisper, he gave them his rule for success. In a solemn voice, he said, "Gentlemen, always put a knot in your thread".

It was his way of saying that the bigger successes in life are dependent on conscientious attention to small details. One must build on small, sure foundation stones. Many lives of great promise have been thwarted because in a rush to pursue larger goals, they may have skipped over some of those small practices and details necessary for the bigger task. Many a relationship has been shipwrecked, too, not because of the lack of intelligence or fidelity, but because of sharp tongues, neglected little courtesies, failure to do the little things. A sense of balance and proportion which tells us that little