

"THE MORAL CONFUSION OF OUR TIME"

INTRODUCTION

Some of you will recall that several years ago a number of the major avenues of our city were converted from two-way traffic to one-way traffic. Fifth Avenue - Madison Avenue - Lexington Avenue - Third Avenue - just to name a few. The change was accompanied by some degree of confusion and frustration. Some of us had the experience of getting to the corner of Fifth Avenue and 86th Street with the intention of driving north only to discover that all traffic was going in the opposite direction. Then we would look up and see an unfamiliar street sign pointing south, and then we would remember that the traffic designations had been reversed. Confusing, I suppose, for the occasional visitor to the city, but even more so for the native.

It's a little that way with the moral confusion of our time. There has been some tampering and changing of the signs by which we live, and many do not know quite where they are. There was a sign which read, "Honesty is the best policy", but now there is another sign which reads, "Take what you want when you want it". There was a sign which read, "Sex is sacred, a part of the responsible love of marriage", but now there is another sign which suggests, "Forget the old restraints. We're animals". There was a sign which read, "Watch out for habits that enslave", but now there is another sign which reads, "Tune in and turn on with drugs...." There was a sign which read, "Have the courage of your convictions", but now there is a sign which says, "What convictions?"

DEVELOPMENT

If the signs seem to have been switched, and the crisis in personal character is alarming, it is by no means the sole responsibility of the younger generation. It is our older generation that has saturated the market with pornography for profit and books and plays that glorify the more sordid side of life. It is our older generation that has made common the short-cut and the pay-off and the kick-back in business. It is our older generation that has developed greed in labor unions. It is our older generation that has developed and dropped the atomic bomb, that has morally justified the carnage in Vietnam, until as James Reston says, "We are the flies that have captured the fly-paper".

There is so much moral foginess and befuddlement in our time. The signs seem to be down; the compass seems to be lost, and sometimes in the fog a voice is heard, "Why should we be moral?"

When we bring this question to the New Testament, we find some answers. Let me put before you a ladder of three answers, in ascending importance, and develop each one with you. A person should be moral: for his own sake - for others' sake - and for God's sake.

FOR HIS OWN SAKE

First of all then: for his own sake. I think there is a kind of enlightened self-interest at work when a person comes to terms with a moral order at the center of things. The New Testament is quite explicit about the dependability of that moral order:

"Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for whatsoever a man sows, that he will also reap...."

Jesus drew a picture of it, when he told a story about a young man who was sure he could do just as he pleased when and how he pleased, until a day came when he was far enough gone and far enough down in a far country, and as the record has it, "When he came to his senses, he said, 'I'm going home....'"

Regardless of whether or not his Father welcomed him, the prodigal knew that for his own sake he had come to terms with the moral law. Now we have had a wave of suggestions in our time that there are no absolutes - that ethics are situational - that morals are relative. And we ought to listen to what these brethren are saying, for they are rightly reminding us of the brittleness of legalism and the necessity for love as the ultimate good. But if they simply bring us out at the conclusion that all the sign-posts are down and all the moral laws have been repealed, then there is something wrong with their vision or our hearing, and we are in for trouble.

There are some laws which are woven into the very constitution of our existence. Some of them are physical, and some of them are spiritual. There is a law about gravity, which I am free to break, but only at the risk of being broken. There are laws of health - about sleep and food and exercise - which I am quite free to break, but I am not free from the consequences. And there are laws about human conduct, which again I may choose to break, but I cannot choose the consequences.

"The Ten Commandments" - they have been called since the day of Moses - ten guide lines for living. "You shall have no other gods before me". "You shall not steal". "You shall not kill". "You shall not commit adultery". "You shall not bear false witness". (And who was it who said, after hearing the Ten Commandments read in church, 'Well....at least I haven't made any graven images lately!') Scratch human history any place you want, and you will find civilization rising and falling in line with goodness and truth and beauty which are the given element in human society. Nations do not create these principles; they discover them. Dip into biography any place you want to, and you will find people building or breaking their lives in relation to some rules for the game. Men do not create these laws; they find them!

A magazine article last fall was entitled, "Two For the Football Show: The Swinger and the Square" - and it was a study in contrast between Joe Namath of the Jets and Fran Tarkenton of the Giants. It would hardly be fair to suggest that the two players represent exact opposites; surely each has his faults and each his virtues. But there is a basic contrast between play-boy Namath and the more disciplined Tarkenton. The author had this striking sentence in describing them:

"The most deep-rooted contrast of all between the jaunty little Giant and the high-living Jet may be the manner in which they regard their tomorrows."

Namath is a fatalist who does not expect to see the age of 50. Tarkenton is an optimist who looks forward to the future.....and I guess that follows. I think a person can feel a little more confident about the future - in his marriage, his work - his influence - his retirement - if he has had some concern for integrity and morality along the way.

"I have to live with myself and so
I want to be fit for myself to know....

I don't want to stand with the setting sun,
And hate myself for the things I've done."

A man does have to live with himself - and in that fact is one incentive to morality.

FOR OTHERS' SAKE People are forever saying, "This is my life. It's my business what I do with it - and mine alone". But the New Testament Consider the second answer. Why be moral? For the sake of others.

keeps saying something else - that we are members one of another, and what one person does inevitably affects the people with whom he is bound together. It was the New Testament insight that John Donne was declaring when he said:

"No man is an island unto himself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the mainland....any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore, never sent to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee".

So often people do not stop to think about that when they take a wrong turn. "If I get burned....so what". "It's my problem and I'll suffer the consequences". If only it were that simple. But the due bills come in sooner or later, and they are addressed not only to the individual, but to his family and his friends. We see this in "The Graduate" - in the hurt and humiliation brought into the Robinson family by the irresponsible and lustful behavior of Mrs. Robinson and Benjamin.

"Hide it in a hiding place, where no one ever goes.
Put it in your pantry with your cupcakes.
It's a little secret, just the Robinsons' affair.
Most of all, you've got to hide it from the kids."

And here's to you, Mrs. Robinson,
Jesus loves you more than you will know.
God bless you, please, Mrs. Robinson,
Heaven holds a place for those who pray"

No person suffers the consequences of his mistakes individually, ~~but that~~ His family and his friends hurt with him. No couple makes a shamble of their marriage, but that children bear the scars. So often this strikes me as about the worst feature of wrong doing - the suffering that it brings upon the relatively innocent people who are deeply involved by way of love and caring.

The brighter side of the coin is that there is a tremendous amount of steadiness and strength inspired by the knowledge of the confidence and the caring of others. When Charles Elie was President of Harvard, he said that the strongest appeal he was ever able to bring to bear on students consisted in making clear to them how much they had been sacrificed for. Some of us have at least half a hint as to what he meant. We come from homes of such love and faith and ideals that we could not readily settle for some cheap counterfeits. We have had friends whose confidence in us saved us from detours and defeats. We have life partners and children so dear to us that there are some low roads that we could not casually take.

Someone has offered us this definition of love:

"Love is the overwhelming desire and persistent efforts of two people to create each for the other the conditions under which the other can become the man or the woman God intended him or her to be".

That kind of strengthening and straightening love is about the best antidote for the new morality which, I fear, often turns out to be no morality.

FOR GOD'S SAKE

There's another rung in the ladder and without it, this sermon would not be at all true to the New Testament.

Finally, we are moral for God's sake. The New Testament is not first of all an

exhortation to morality. Jesus did not ask the disciples to take pledges about cheating and carousing and getting even and getting ahead. He simply said, "Come, follow me".....with some faith that somewhere in the journey of discipleship the living love of God would be so communicated to them that their conduct would become Christ-like. It was a rocky road and one of them never made it. But finally, on this side of the resurrection, people looked at the rocklike steadiness of the disciples and as the Book of Acts has it, "they recognized that they had been with Jesus".

And it was the same story with Paul. Once he was trying desperately to be moral, for his own sake and for others' - no doubt. But it wasn't enough. And he would sit and ponder the ruins of his resolutions. Remember his words: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do....wretched man that I am". But keep going with his life story and you hear him later on singing a different tune, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me....for the love of Christ controls us".

And this, I feel, is what the New Testament is all about and that is what Christianity is all about - not beginning with restrictions and regulations, but beginning with a Christ who stands at the door and knocks, "If any man hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in.."

It was Augustine who back in the 4th century summed up the highest concept of morality in a few words: "Love God and do as you please". This is a dangerous doctrine, because people so easily forget the first and remember the last. Except that we have known people for whom the last is so obviously related to the first. They do not live from a rule-book; they live from a relationship with God that so clearly colors their conduct. They come to the tempting places and they do not fall; they come to the hurting places and they are not bitter; they come to the valleys and they are not afraid.

CONCLUSION: Somebody remembers the night that Toscanini gave his last concert in Carnegie Hall. The maestro was past eighty and he came out on the stage and raised his baton. After a moment of silence, the orchestra, a hundred pieces or more, stole softly into the first quiet movement of the symphony. On and on, until as the volume grew, first one and then another lifted his eyes from the notes and fastened them on the conductor there, with the wistful smile on his lips. And all the music they had in them swept up - toward that face.

How can we better describe the mystery and the mastery of Christ. There are notes for playing - yes - and rules for playing the game - but there are moments when we meet up and look up and all the music that we have in us is swept up toward that face - "the glory of God in the face of Christ". Then, perhaps, we have an inkling of what Augustine meant when he said: "Love God and do as you please".

LET US PRAY: Eternal Spirit, what we have talked about, make real now in our lives in these moments. Stir within us some of the music thou hast meant us to provide, and call for a clear tune - thou patient, persistent, conductor of our lives. In Christ's spirit, we pray. Amen