

"THE SUPERIOR LIFE"

TEXT: "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the Kingdom of God."
Matthew 5:20

One time, R. H. L. Sheppard said:

"Christianity consists not in abstaining from doing things no gentleman would think of doing, but in doing things that are unlikely to occur to anyone who is not in touch with the spirit of Christ."

These words are a pointed exposition of the section of the Sermon on the Mount which is brought to a climax by our text. The religion that Jesus taught was far from being just a matter of simple moral decency. Conventional respectability was not enough for him. The scribes and the Pharisees of his day were honest, law-abiding citizens. They were above reproach as far as the morality of his day was concerned. But this is not what Jesus was talking about. He wanted his followers to show a superior kind of morality, based on a vital relationship with God. Righteousness for him was no negative thing, but rather a positive, dynamic, spiritual attitude toward life.

Someone has pointed out that there are fifty million people living in the United States who cannot furnish legal proof that they were born. That is, their birth certificates are missing. Much more serious, however, is that fact that millions of people give no evidence of any kind that they are really alive. They are good, but dull. It is before these that Jesus would lift the challenge of the superior life. He calls us to a life that is alive with power and beauty. It is a goodness that is forgetful of self, magnified by love, and glorified in dedication.

"EXCEPT your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter the Kingdom of God....."

It is well for us to consider this morning FOUR aspects of the superior Christian life.

SUPERIOR DISCIPLINE In the first place, the Christian life demands superior discipline. The real Christian is not satisfied with merely meeting the average requirements of the society in which he lives. He demands the very best of himself. And this is no easy matter. It requires a stern self-discipline which many of us do not like.

Luther Burbank use to hold what his neighbors called, \$10,000 bonfires. Into such a bonfire there might go 499 cherry plants out of the 500 that he had grown. Or there might be 99,999 rose bushes which had been brought to bloom in order to find the one specimen which was saved from the fire. On one occasion, 1500 gladiolus bulbs were burned after a half dozen of the finest plants had been preserved. All of this sounds rather extravagant, but Luther Burbank gave his reason for doing this in the following words:

"It is better to run the risk of losing a perfected product, through the destruction of the element that went into it, than to issue forth to the world a lot of second bests which will clutter the earth with inferiority or mediocrity."

In other words, Luther Burbank insisted on nothing but the very best. He was impatient of imperfection. It was n accident, I sup ose, that he was called the "plant wizard".

There is a definite parallel here for the Christian life. Jesus also insisted on pefection:

"Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect....."

"Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees....."

Jesus is making strong demands on our character. Now when this superior idealism takes hold of our hearts, a sort of pruning process takes place. When we set our faces toward godlikeness, we turn away from those habits and those attitudes that are inferior and godless. Many of us are second rate people and second rate Christians because we have been satisfied with second rate living. We want to be good, and yet we want to be bad at the same time. And so it is that there are too many average, ordinary Christians who are easily satisfied with some pleasant moral mediocrity, some comfortable, but shoddy spiritual standard.

This superior is not a matter of following certain rules. It doesn't consist in a series "Do Nots". Rather it is a matter of following God. And this means giving up the things that are against God. Some things are wrong for the Christian not because they are evil, but because they keep him from doing his best. All of this demands discipline of the highest type - discipline of mind, discipline of time, discipline of work, discipline of sacrifice.

This past week my wife and I went over to Pier 90 to wave good-bye to one of the members of our church who was sailing for Europe on the Queen Mary. As I saw that beautiful ship move out into the Hudson River and head down the harbor, I was reminded that before it reached the open sea it would pass through the Narrows. The Narrows is a distance of one mile, with Long Island on one side and Staten Island on the other. In a sense, this is a parable of life. For only as we pass through the Narrow Gates of life, do we enter into the great sea of human fulfillment, and accomplishment. Disciplined emotions..... disciplined habits.....disciplined thinking.....disciplined ambitions.. disciplined consciences.....all of these are necessary for the superior Christian life.

In the wordssoffHarry Emerson Fosdick:

"No horse gets anywhere till he is harnessed.
No steam or gas ever drives anything until it is confined. No Niagara is ever turned into light and power until it is tunneled. And no life ever grows to great heights until it is focused, dedicated, and disciplined."

SUPERIOR HUMILITY

Second, the Christian life demands superior humility. I think that Jesus was a little bit suspicious of the righteousness of the Pharisees because they boasted about how good they were. They were proud of the fact that they obeyed all the rules. They admitted no faults. In a sense, their pride in their own goodness destroyed the value of the goodness itself.

It's difficult not to be proud and boastful. I'm afraid that pride is a common failing among Christians. Ministers, as well as well as laymen are subject to this trouble. We all like to over-rate ourselves and think that we're more important than we're worth. This will get us into a pack of troubles if we aren't careful, as it did the young minister who was called to the pulpit of a large church in Washington, D. C.. He was quite proud of his attainment. His wife and his mother attended the installation service. The church was filled for the occasion. Perhaps you can just picture the solemn occasion. The processional began up the long aisle. The young minister brought up the rear. He spotted his wife sitting at the end of a pew. As he passed her, he reached out and pinched her arm whispering in her ear, "How'm I doing, baby." But as he went on, he noticed to his great consternation that the woman wasn't his wife at all, but one of his new parishoners.

Boastful vanity is foreign to Christian righteousness. In reference to all attainments, the Christian remembers the spirit of Christ and is humbled before it. The egotistical spirit discounts Christian character. The true child of God is above all a genuine person. His goodness is real and solid and honest. It is a part of of his very being and not something to be put on from the outside. Superior humility is a mark of the Christian life.

SUPERIOR HUMAN UNDERSTANDING
AND FORGIVENESS.

third, the Christian life demands superior understanding and forgiveness. Understanding and forgiveness go together. The Pharisees that Jesus often provoked liked to sit in judgment on their fellow man. They held themselves up as model of good behavior, and felt free to criticize those who broke the rules and didn't measure up to their standards. This type of behavior irritated Jesus. He felt they were lacking in understanding and forgiveness.

If we aren't careful, this spirit is apt to take hold of us. Those in the church are often quick to criticize those outside the church. We often find it easy to condemn, and hard to forgive. We're quick to find fault and slow to understand. We like to judge others, but we don't like to be judged. It was this spirit of harsh judgment that Jesus was trying to tear out of the hearts of men.

Henry Sloane Coffin tells of an incident which occurred in a church where he was minister. There were two women who were constantly at each other's throats. They were leading members of the church. Once they had been very close friends, but now they refused to speak or associate in any way. This deep rift was hurting them. Dr. Coffin decided on a rather definite plan of action. One day he checked to be sure one of them was at home. Then he took the other in his car on a church errand. He stopped at the door of first. When she opened the door, the two woman stood facing each other. Neither said a word. Then the preacher pushed his companion inside and quickly closed the

door from the outside. He stayed outside for half an hour, and then cautiously opened the door. The two women were laughing and crying at the same time. All was forgiven and they remained fast friends for life.

And so it is that the sooner we take the initiative in seeking forgiveness and in righting wrongs, the better and easier it is. Resentments and grudges have a way of becoming fixed with time. It takes a person with a big heart and strong courage to admit to another that he was wrong. The rightness of the Christian finds expression in understanding and forgiveness. John Wesley put it in these words:

"Do all the good you can, by all the means that you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

SUPPORTED BY A SUPERIOR
FAITH IN GOD.

And finally, I would like to suggest that the Christian life must be supported by a superior faith in God. A superior faith in God undergirds all that we

say and do and are.

Henry Pitt Crane tells of a friend of his who began a promising career as a singer. This woman was endowed with great gifts of beauty and talent. She studied abroad with the finest teachers and was well on the way to becoming a great star in concert and opera. Then she got married. Unfortunately she married a man who didn't appreciate her ability, and he selfishly set out to quench her spirit and her ambitions. He selfishly subjected her singing spirit to insufferable domestic tyrannies. He imposed many petty restrictions and persecutions which succeeded in ruining her career. She endured all of this with great patience. Finally her husband died, leaving her without a cent. She supported herself and her growing daughter by giving music lessons. The hopes and the promises of her younger days were now only a memory. She wrote a letter to Dr. Crane telling of her life and closing with these words: "Actually I have done only one thing on this earth. I have sung."

To this Dr. Crane asked a natural question: "How could she sing? Thousands who have never had to endure suffering have grown silent, or their songs have soured into cynicism or self pity, and yet she had kept singing - spiritually triumphant. How could one suffer so and never lose one's song?"

There's an answer to this question. It's found in the words of an old gospel hymn that goes something like this:

"I sing because I'm happy.
I sing because I'm free.
His eye is on the sparrow,
And I know he watches me."

There's our answer. It's this kind of a faith that the superior Christian life is based on. It is a faith that is built on a sense of God's goodness and concern. A faith and a trust in God as our Heavenly Father. Faith in Jesus and his teachings and his spirit. A faith and a concern in our fellow men as brothers in the family of God's children - these are the heart and the very soul of the superior Christian life.

It means that we can walk triumphantly through all of life's experiences believing that:

"His eye is on the sparrow.
And I know he watches me....."

LET US PRAY:

Our Father, and our God, help us to live this superior Christian life. May our lives be disciplined. May our spirits be humble, and in all of our dealings with others, help us to be understanding and forgiving. Give to us a strong faith, that no matter what our lot may be, we may ever believe in the final victory of goodness. Amen.