

"THE UNDERSTANDING LIFE"

James Thurber once remarked:

"The human race is both horrible and wonderful. Occasionally I get very mad at people, but there's nothing you can do about it. I like people and hate them at the same time. I wouldn't draw them in cartoons if I didn't think they were horrible, and I wouldn't write about them if I didn't think they were wonderful."

I think there are times when most of us feel somewhat the same way. In our better moments we're sure that people are wonderful. The trouble is that we have too many of those dark moments of the soul when we aren't quite so sure, and we're apt to find fault with our fellow man. To be sure, it's impossible to keep from passing day to day judgments of one kind or another upon people. It's a normal experience with everybody. We all have our likes and dislikes. And this too, society depends upon certain judgments in order to keep moving forward. We can't remain neutral when faced with certain moral questions. As Christians, we're often called on to evaluate people and to condemn wrong doing and wrong doers.

We find that Jesus had some strong words to say regarding judgments. For those of you who would like a text, let me refer you to the seventh chapter of Matthew's Gospel, the first and second verses:

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get."

In this particular passage Jesus is not objecting to judgments so much as he is objecting to what you might call a "self righteous severity" in our dealings with other people. He's appealing to us to be generous and merciful in our judgments of others. He's encouraging us to avoid a spirit of hostile criticism. He's encouraging us to live "an understanding life".

This morning I'd like to talk to you quite seriously about this understanding life. Time permits me only to suggest two thoughts or two principles to you that I consider to be a part of this understanding life.

HUMAN JUDGMENTS ARE LIMITED

To begin with, the understanding life recognizes the fact that our judgments of others are limited. It's well for us to remember that in every situation that we're tempted to judge there may be some factors that do not appear on the surface. Our judgments are limited.

This reminds me of a story about a young reporter who was cautioned by his editor never to state anything as a fact unless he could verify it from his own experience or knowledge. On one occasion this reporter was sent out to cover a very important social event. All of the important people in the community were present. Remembering the advice of his editor, the reporter submitted the following report of the event:

"A woman giving the name of Mrs. James Jones, reported to be one of the society leaders of the city, is said to have given what appeared to be a party yesterday to a number of alleged ladies. The hostess claims to be the wife of a reputed attorney."

I suppose that something like this would be good discipline for all of us when we're tempted to pass critical judgment upon others. The plain truth is that we say a lot of things that we really don't know anything about. We're all too willing to condemn people on gossip, rumor, or insufficient evidence. Indeed, the louder we condemn, the less we sometimes know. Now I think Jesus was well aware of this perverse streak in human nature, and in this instance he is simply warning us not to fall into this trap. Indirectly he's suggesting that all of us are subject to judgment, and that the person who delights in picking out the flaws in other people is usually doing nothing more than exposing his own inadequacies.

Thomas Carlyle once judged Charles Lamb in the following fashion: "A more pitiful, rickety, gasping, staggering tomfool I do not know." Henry Hazlitt had this to say about the same Charles Lamb: "A more delightful, a more provoking, a wittier, sensible man I do not know" Contrasting judgments of the same man. Perhaps it's a good thing that the final judgment is not in our hands, or in the hands of our friends, but that it rests in the hands of God!

And so if you're looking for some kind of practical guidepost in this matter of critical judgments, let me offer you a formula that comes down to us from the KORAN. It's entitled, Three Gates:

"If you are tempted to reveal a tale someone has told to you about another, make it pass before you speak three gates of gold. First: is it true? Second: is it kind? Third: is it needful? And if it passes through these gateways three, then you may tell the tale and not fear what the result of speech may be."

Is it true? Is it kind? Is it needful?

HUMAN UNDERSTANDING BEGINS AT HOME Now the second principle of this understanding life is simply this that human understanding must begin at home. We talk about world brotherhood, and it's a splendid vision, but it will never come to pass until we begin to practice it where we are, in our daily relationships at home, at work, and in the church. Jesus puts the responsibility for this understanding life right where it belongs - on the individual heart and conscience. He asks us why we worry about the faults of others, and fail to do anything about our own. We're so quick to pin labels on our friends. Perhaps we need to remember the words of that old negro spiritual: "It's not my sister, not my brother, but it's me O Lord standing in the need of prayer."

Some of you may be trying to read between the lines of this sermon. You may be wondering why I chose to preach on this particular theme. Let me reassure you that no specific incident or event prompted this message. I simply feel it's good for all of us to be reminded of these things from time to time. And so these thoughts are offered to all of you in the hope that you'll take the initiative in seeking

forgiveness and righting wrongs in those relationships in your own life where perhaps a little more understanding or a little more patience would have made the difference. Resentments and grudges have a way of becoming fixed with the passing of time. They fester and become so difficult to heal. Granted - it takes a person with a big heart and lots of courage to admit that he may have been in the wrong, but it's only on this basis that this splendid vision of brotherhood can be built and will be built.

And so we come to the end of this sermon. Once again I have ventured to offer practical advice. I'd like to close this message by sharing with you incident that occurred in a class room in Scotland many years ago, and which in my mind seems to suggest the kind of spirit upon which this understanding life must be built. The famous Scottish professor John Stuart Blackie always required his students to hold up their book in the left hand when they stood up to recite. One day a new student appeared in this class room who was not familiar with this bit of class room discipline. He was called on to recite and stood up holding his book in the right hand. Professor Blackie protested saying, "Young man...hold the book in the other hand please". But the student kept right on reading ignoring the request. Again Blackie spoke...this time with anger and impatience in his voice, "The other hand please!" The student stopped reading. There was an embarrassing silence, and then he slowly lifted the stump of a left arm. It was all he had. With this John Stuart Blackie rushed down from the platform and kneeling in front of the student cried: "Forgive me. Please, young man... forgive me!"

LET US PRAY:

Our Father and our God, as we come to thy table this morning, may we come remembering that our judgments of other people are by nature limited. And may we remember that human understanding has to begin where we are, on a man to man basis. We've often been critical of others in order to inflate our own importance. Help us to love those who are hard to live with. In thy name we pray. Amen.

"LIVING THE UNDERSTANDING LIFE"

James Thurber once said:

"The human race is both horrible and wonderful. Occasionally I get very mad at human beings, but there's nothing you can do about it. I like people and hate them at the same time. I wouldn't draw them in cartoons, if I didn't think they were horrible, and I wouldn't write about them, if I didn't think they were wonderful."

Most of us feel somewhat the same way. In our better moments we're sure that people are wonderful. The trouble is that we have too many dark moments, when it is easy to find fault with our friends.

It's impossible, of course, to keep from passing day-by-day judgments of one kind or another on other people. This is a normal everyday experience with everybody. We all have our likes and dislikes. Society depends on certain judgments and decisions in order to keep moving forward. We can't remain neutral when faced with certain moral questions. As Christians we are often called upon to evaluate people and to condemn wrongdoing and wrongdoers.

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, has some

very strong words to say regarding judgments:

"Judge not, that ye be not
judged. For with what judgment
ye judge, ye shall be judged."

In this verse, Jesus is not objecting to judgments

He is lifting before us a severe warning
against self-righteous severity in our
dealings with people.....

He appeals to us to be merciful and
generous in our attitudes toward our
fellow man.....

He urges us to avoid the spirit of hostile
criticism.....

He is encouraging us to live the understand-
ing life.....

There are at least three principles in this
teaching that Jesus surely wanted to bring to our
attention.

HUMAN JUDGMENTS
ARE LIMITED.

The first thought is that
human judgments are limited.

A young reporter was told by his editor
never to state anything as a fact unless he could
verify it from personal knowledge or experience.
One day the young reporter was sent out to cover a
very important social event. The most important
people in the community were to be present.
Remembering the advice of his editor, the reporter

sent in the following story:

"A woman giving the name of Mrs. James Jones, reported to be one of the society leaders of the city, is said to have given what appeared to be a party yesterday to a number of alleged ladies. The hostess claims to be the wife of a reputed attorney."

Something like this would be good discipline for us when we're given to passing critical judgments on others. The plain truth is that we often say a lot of things we simply do not know anything about. We are all too willing to condemn people on rumor, or gossip, or on insufficient evidence. Indeed, the louder we condemn, the less we sometimes know.

Jesus was well aware of this perverse streak in human nature. He warns us against falling into such a trap. He is implying that we are all subject to judgment. He suggests that the person who delights in picking flaws in others will thereby be exposing his own. He is saying that harsh criticism is usually based on lack of evidence.

It is interesting to note Thomas Carlyle's estimate of Charles Lamb: A MORE PITIFUL, RICKETY, GASPING, STAGGERING TOMFOOL I DO NOT KNOW. On the other hand, this is what Henry

Hazlitt said about the same Charles Lamb: THE MOST DELIGHTFUL, THE MOST PROVOKING, THE MOST WITTY AND SENSIBLE OF MEN. Two men had contrasting judgments of the same man.....

It's a good thing that the final judgment is not in our hands, or the hands of our friends, but in the hands of God.

The habit of passing snap judgment on people without sufficient evidence is not only UNFAIR, but it is DANGEROUS. It can blot character. It can destroy reputations. It can raise dark questions that are hard to live down. It can involve innocent parties. It's often been said that BUSY TONGUES CAN BE THE INSTRUMENTS OF THE DEVIL.....

There is a formula for telling stories called THREE GATES which, I believe, comes to us from the Koran. ~~I referred to it once in a story for the children of our church.~~ Not only ~~is it good advice for children,~~ but there's a lesson in it for adults.

"If you are tempted to reveal a tale someone has told to you about another, make it pass, before you speak, three

gates of gold:

FIRST: Is it true?

SECOND: Is it needful?

THIRD: Is it kind?

And if it passes through these gateways three, then you may tell the tale, nor fear what the result of speech may be!"

The understanding life recognizes that there are in every doubtful situation many factors that do not appear on the surface. The Christian is willing to admit his own ignorance of the facts when faced with the temptation to pass some hard judgment.

When we do not know, we ought to keep still. Human judgments are limited.

HUMAN JUDGMENTS
ARE SELF-CONDEMNING.

The second principle

in this understanding

life is that human judgments are self-condemning. Here is a sharp point of the message of Jesus. Jesus warns us against ill considered criticism of others. He says it works damage on ourselves.

"Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged. And with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you."

These are strong words. Jesus is saying that we will be judged in the same way we choose to judge. Essentially it is this idea, that we get back from life, what we give to it.

A dramatic example of this law of retribution is told by Carl Wallace Petty. In 1911, when an epidemic of pneumonia was sweeping across northern China, a friend of Dr. Petty called on a wealthy New Yorker and asked for a contribution to help send more medical supplies, nurses, and doctors to the suffering Chinese. The man was quite critical of the idea. He didn't want to have any part of it. He thought that the Chinese should take care of themselves. A few years later an outfit of Chinese laborers on their way to France to dig trenches in the war was billeted for several months on Long Island. They had scarcely sailed for the western front when the epidemic called influenza broke out in New York City and swept across our nation. The Chinese plague had come to this

country by those workers. One day Dr. Petty read in the newspaper where the daughter of the wealthy New Yorker who had refused to help the suffering Chinese had died in the clutches of the Chinese influenza.

"With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you...."

This law of retribution is not always as sharply defined as it is in this case. But nevertheless it is true.

"Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap...."

"They that take the sword shall perish by the sword...."

This is a law that is true in human nature.

"Water finds its own level sooner or later, and our treatment of others returns at last upon ourselves."

Quietly and inevitably the way we treat our friends reacts upon our own outlook, spirit and effectiveness as persons....

Anger, hatred and faultfinding poison the mind and the body....

Sustained ill will has an unhealthy reaction on the nervous system....

The unkind word, the unfair judgment - these leave a residue in the soul of those who give them.....

If we cheat, we will be cheated....

If we deceive, we will be deceived....

If we lie, we shall be lied too....

If we live at odds with other people,
we will be at odds with ourselves....

If we misuse our authority over
others, we will pay for it....

This law is as impersonal and inescapable as the
law of gravity. We would do well to understand
it and use it.....

"WITH WHAT MEASURE YOU METE,
IT SHALL BE MEASURED TO YOU."

That is to say, human judgments are self-
condemning.

HUMAN UNDERSTANDING
BEGINS AT HOME.

The third idea that Jesus
wanted us to grasp was

that human understanding begins at home.

Said Eric Johnson:

"We talk about building
bridges of brotherhood around
the world in answer to communist
pretensions, and that's a splendid
vision. But brotherhood begins
on a man to man basis at home and
not on a man to man basis across
the oceans. Without that footing
it is idle talk and an empty
vision."

Jesus puts the responsibility for the under-

standing life right where it belongs: on the individual heart and conscience. He asks us why we worry about other people's faults and don't do something about our own.

"Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shall thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye."

We're often so quick to pin labels on our friends. We need to remember the words of the old negro spiritual:

"It's not my sister, not my brother, but it's me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer."

An unknow writer brings this whole matter down to earth for us by listing ten things for which no one has ever been sorry.

1. For doing good to all.
2. For speaking evil of no one..
3. For hearing before judging.
4. For thinking before speaking.
5. For holding an angry tongue.
6. For being kind to the distressed.
7. For asking pardon for all wrongs..
8. For being patient toward everybody.
9. For stopping the ear to the

talebearer.

10. For disbelieving evil reports.

These things sound simple and commonplace. But they're hard to do. It's always easier to cover up our own deficiencies by holding up to scorn the weaknesses of others. Those who are always eager to correct, sometimes are in need of great correction themselves. We are too quick to believe the worst about people. We need to be more willing to give them the benefit of the doubt.

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 and the church. Dr. Coffin decided the time had come for him to take a hand. 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 home of the first. When she opened the door, the two women 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 in each other's arms. All was forgiven and they remained fast friends for life.

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. Then they fester and are so hard to heal. It takes a person with a big heart and strong courage to admit to another that he has wronged.

The famous Scottish professor John Stuart Blackie always required his students to hold their book in the left hand when they stood up to recite. One day a new student stood up with his book in the right hand. Professor Blackie protested: THE OTHER HAND, PLEASE. But the student read on ignoring the request. Again Blackie spoke with anger; DO YOU HEAR ME. THE OTHER HAND, PLEASE! There was a moment of silence. Then the student slowly held up a stump of a left arm. It was all he had. Then

John Stuart Blackie, great spirit that he was rushed down from the platform and knelt down at the student's feet and cried: FORGIVE ME. CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME.

Of such is the understanding life.

Jesus is telling us:

FIRST: that our judgments of others are limited.

SECOND: That our judgments are self-condemning. For the way we judge, we shall be judged....

THIRD: He remind us that human understanding must begin at home, with us.

LET US PRAY:

Forgive us, Our Father, for our many shortcomings.....

We have often been critical of others in order to inflate our own importance.....

Help us to love those that are hard to live with.

Give us loving, and understanding hearts.

We ask this in thy name. Amen.

To know all is to forgive all.

(By Nixon Waterman)

If I knew you and you knew me—
If both of us could clearly see,
And with an inner sight divine
The meaning of your heart and mine,
I'm sure that ^{we} would differ less
And clasp our hands in friendliness;
Our thoughts would pleasantly agree
If I knew you, and you knew me.

If I knew you, and you knew me,
As each one knows his own self, we
Could look each other in the face
And see therein a true grace.
Life has so many hidden woes,
So many thorns for every rose;
The "why" of things our hearts would see
If I knew you and you knew me.

How do you like this for this time
of year? It was written by a
Prof. Caruthers of a Kansas College
around the turn of the century.
There is more to the poem. — I don't
know the name of it. — a.n.

A mist on the far horizon,
The infinite, tender sky,
The rich, ripe tint of the cornfield,
And the wild geese flying high,
And all over upland and lowland,
The charm of the golden-rod,
Some of us call it autumn —
And others call it God,