

WHAT DO I NEED IN ORDER TO GET AHEAD?

INTRODUCTION

Today we come to the fifth in this series of sermons all of which have been cast in the same form. This morning we shall be centering our thoughts around this question: What Do I Need In Order To Get Ahead?

An incident from the life of Moses perhaps will help to lead us into this sermon. Moses, as you'll recall, was brought up in Pharaoh's palace, as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. And the court of Egypt at that time was probably the richest, and the most powerful and the most brilliant court in the entire world. And Moses, as the Pharaoh's grandson, was heir to all of the royal rights and privileges of that court. The daughter of Pharaoh was probably the only person in the court who really knew the truth about Moses. By this I mean that she knew that he was a Jew, and that his people were despised slaves, and she knew that if she had not rescued him as a baby, he would probably have been killed along with hundreds of other male Jewish babies in an Egyptian effort to exterminate the surplus Jews. But Moses eventually found out who he was. Adopted children have a way of always finding out sooner or later who they are if their parents are not wise enough to tell them ahead of time who they are. In this case, Moses found out he was a Jew. He saw the affliction of his own people.

There were three possible courses open to him. He could let his people go, i.e., he could let them down. He need never acknowledge his identity with them, for he could easily "pass" as an Egyptian. That was one course. Another possible course that was open to him was to live a two-faced, double life. He could to the best of his ability straddle the issue and try to live with one foot in Pharaoh's palace, and one in the slaves' quarters. He could so to speak, play the game from both ends...have his cake and eat it too. You know what I mean. There was a third possibility open to him. He could leave the court altogether, leave his brilliant future behind him, and go and live with his people as a slave.

Imagine if you can a modern American counselling Moses at the time when he had to make this rather difficult decision, trying to determine in his own mind which of the three ways he would take. If you can imagine it, it might have followed this line of counselling:

"Don't be a fool Moses. Think this thing through. After all you happened to get a lucky break when you were a baby. You didn't ask for it. You didn't do anything to bring it about. It was tossed in your lap. Don't be a fool. Don't throw it away. Your people are slaves, a miserable minority group under the thumb of the richest people of the world. They'll always be slaves. Nothing you do will change the situation. They'll never know, and what they don't know isn't going to hurt them. Besides, maybe you can do more for them as an Egyptian in a high place, than as a Jew in a low place. Stay where you are....."

Something about it that sounds all too familiar. Whether anyone ever

offered Moses such advice, we do not know, but we can be sure of this that if they did he rejected their counsel for eventually he chose the third course that was open to him. In other words, he left the court of Pharaoh, and he turned his back on all of those things that the court might have given to him for his own future, and he went to live with his people. And years later when the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews was looking back on this decision, he wrote of it in rather unforgettable words:

"Moses refused to be call the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season"

We pause to wonder why. Why did he do it? Why did he make that decision? Blood thicker than water. Perhaps. Born with a sense of guilt or a martyr complex? Perhaps. Why did he turn his back on the palace of Pharaoh and go off to life in slavery? He did it because he could not live a lie! He did it because he could not be a two faced person! He did it because he was a whole being, and he could not split himself into two parts. He did it because he had a highly developed sense of personal integrity.

DEVELOPMENT What Do I Need In Order To Get Ahead? What Must a Person Have Above All Else If He Is To Amount To Something Really Great In Life? Personal intergrity. Moses had it. I was interested to read recently that a superior athlete must have above all else a strong physical grip. And in something of the same fashion the superior person in the broader game of life must have a strong grip on the basic moral virtues of life. A group of business leaders meeting in Chicago recently published a paper entitled, "The Selection, Training, and Development of Tomorrow's Executives". The number one requirement that they listed for a good executive was integrity.

Personal integrity is the very rock bottom foundation for successful living. It's made up of moral principle, self-restraint and discipline, dependable honesty, and unquestioned honor. Mind you, and it's difficult for some of us to accept this, not every honorable person is going to be a success materially. But no one makes anything worth while of his life who tries to build on the convenient ways of cheating, lying, broken promises, and unethical and shady dealings.

I'm going to make a statement here this morning, and I have no way to prove what I'm going to say, and I imagine that some of you will take exception with what I say, but I have a very strong feeling that the average level of person integrity today in this country is lower than it was, shall we say, one hundred years ago. As I say we have no way of proving this, but it seems to me that by and large, men in public life were more dependable then than they are now. It seems to me that men in private life were more responsible then than they are now. And that men and women in all walks of life were more honest then than they are now even though it may have meant being poor. To be sure, these are generalities, and perhaps we ought to translate some of these thoughts into specific situations which any of us might find ourselves in, and as I do, ask yourself what you would do.....

SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

For instance, suppose you drive an automobile, and you should receive a ticket for a traffic violation. You get it "fixed" if you can. As you do, you learn that over half of the people in this city who get tickets try to get them fixed. Whether they do so or not, is another matter, and I suppose we wouldn't be too surprised to learn someday that they do. I know I heard a ministerial colleague boast only a few days ago that he is still to pay his first parking ticket violation in this city, and knowing the man quite well, I imagine he's had quite a few tickets and, in other words, he's been able to get them "Fixed".

Or a friend who moves in the business world invites you out to dinner. And you notice when you walk into the restaurant that it's an expensive one. You suggest to him that it's terribly expensive and perhaps you ought to go into a simpler one. "Oh" he says, "think nothing of it. It all goes on my expense account". And you feel like saying to him, "Call me anything you want to, but don't call me a business expense".

Take another example. Suppose you're a young man or a young woman trying desperately to carve out a career for yourself in this city in a certain field. You find that you can promote your own career and your own interests by cutting a few corners here and there, compromising some of your high ideals and principles. You can get there a little faster by eliminating from your life some of those rather prudish Victorian ideals principles that you were brought up to believe in. You know what I mean. You can read between the lines. You can get there a little faster by saying the right thing at the right time to the right person in the right place. Oh, to be sure you may feel a bit edgy or uncertain or insecure about this whole business deep down inside, and you try to reassure yourself that it won't be this way once you've arrived.

Suppose you get a letter asking for a recommendation of a person you know. You know that the person in question is a third rate person, not at all suited to the position for which he is seeking your recommendation. You don't want to hurt him, and this is a worthy feeling on your part. And so you write the letter of recommendation, not saying what you really think is the truth about this person's capacity, but what he wants you to think and say about him. It raises an interesting thought: which is going to hurt him more in the long run - the truth about himself or a job for which he is not suited.

Suppose you're in public life (I don't think there's anyone here this morning who's in public life), (but since this ties in I thought I'd include it.)....Suppose you're in public life, you take the advice that was offered to the junior Senator from Massachusetts, Senator Kennedy when he first went to Congress: "The only way to get along is to go along".

I know that some of you are going to say well these are rather trivial matters. But the point is that when you put them all together they make for a softening of the moral fibre of the people of this country, and it's situations like these and others that we have in mind when we say that the average level of integrity is lower in our country today than it was one hundred years ago. I doubt whether any person here this morning has a great deal of real conviction

one way or the other on this current issue of off-track betting. I may be wrong. Perhaps we ought to be voicing our disapproval more than we are on this issue. Speaking personally, it seems to me that the quicker we get over this idea that getting something for nothing will build up the economic and moral structure of our society, the better off we'll be. I can't see where it's going to enrich our society, or build it up, or enhance the goodness of it. Perhaps the present system of suppression is not perfect, but at least it's better than one which will further corrode and cheapen the moral fibre of our people.

A REASON FOR IT I realize we've been getting away from our subject here for a moment or two. I suppose there are different reasons for this lack of integrity and perhaps in all fairness to the subject we ought to mention at least one reason. It seems to me that our moral responsibilities are much more discernible in a town of five hundred than they are in a city of ten or eleven million people.

In 1831, New Salem was a town in Illinois with twelve families living in it. A man by the name of Offutt opened a general store. One day a woman came in to purchase some dry goods. She overpaid her bill by six cents. The manager was a man named Lincoln, and that night he walked six miles to return the six cents. It was easier to do that in New Salem in 1831 than it would be to do it in New York in 1959. The larger the community, the more anonymous the life, and the easier it is to cut corners and compromise. I'm not saying it's right to do it; rather just trying to understand why this decline in personal integrity, and one reason is that the more impersonal life is the more likely is the standard of morality to be law. One could go on and suggest other reasons, but since our time is limited we won't attempt to give any more.

CLOSING SECTION You'll recall that the Great Wall of China was built to keep out the mongol army. It was as high as a hill and broad enough for six horses to ride abreast along the top. For many years it kept out the northern barbarians. Behind it the Chinese felt secure. Even the mighty warrior Genghis Khan could not breach it by force. But this crafty warrior one time sent word in secret to the gate-keeper that he, the gate-keeper would receive gold and a high position if he would open the gate. Tempted by this offer, the gatekeeper opened the gate from within and the armies of the enemy poured in. Legend tells us that the first act of this conquering Genghis Khan was to order the treacherous gate-keeper beheaded.

Perhaps we have here a parable of life. It serves to remind us that we present some pretty bold fronts to the world. We feel fairly secure behind our own little protective walls of education and culture, position, prestige and money. But our real weakness may also lie inside - in our hearts, or in our minds. In other words, there may be times when we're tempted to surrender or violate some of our own inner integrity by some false lure, bribe or temptation. As someone once pointed out "a moment of pleasure, but afterwards a lifetime of heartache". I'm not sure where that ties in, but it may tie in for some of you somewhere along the line. The point in all this is that as we open the doors of our lives to compromise, evil and sin, we're only opening the door to self-destruction. To be sure, for the present moment, it may look like we're getting ahead, but in the long run, we destroy ourselves. Whatever importance we may put on

other things, if we really want our lives to count for something great, we must be willing to build on the moral laws of God. They are as exact as his physical laws. When we defy them, we end up with very little. More than one person has tried to build his life on the shifting sands of greed, lust, expediency, deceit and deception, and has ended up with nothing.

What Do I Need In Order To Get Ahead? We began this sermon with Moses, and we end with one just as great as Moses. For somehow we are reminded of those words spoken by Abraham Lincoln early in the days of the civil war when a group of people came to him with plans for peace, and he said to them:

"I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that at the end when I come to lay down the reigns of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall have at least one friend left and that friend shall be deep down inside of me".

Personal integrity. It's still needed today in our world if a person expects to amount to anything.

LET US PRAY: Guide us, O God, as we try to find our way through a world of confused values. Help us to set our eyes on the far off goals, and to make no peace with compromise or conformity. Take away our temptation to cut corners, and as we acknowledge our weakness, help us to grow in the likeness of him who turned his back on a bright future for a dark cross. Amen.