

"WHEN A PERSON STOPS GROWING"

INTRODUCTION The subject of today's sermon was suggested by a report submitted by a personnel consultant concerning four division managers in his firm - all about fifty years of age. He had come to the conclusion that they did not have the capacity to handle vice-presidential assignments in the firm and that he would have to recommend that they should not be promoted. His report stated that they had reached the ceiling of their potential, had stopped growing, had begun to coast.

Now this is something that may be common in the fifties, but certainly it is not confined to the fifties. There are people who were good performers in their twenties, who began to slow up a little in their thirties, and who by their forties are simply going through the motions and playing out the string on their job. This is a constantly recurring problem, not limited solely to business and advancements and promotions there. It shows up in just about every area of life, which is why I speak of it now, having especially in mind three broad areas.

PHYSICAL To begin with, people go to seed physically. They don't take care - proper care - of their bodies. Given a robust constitution, they allow themselves to get out of condition. They are sensible, intelligent people; they know that physical exercise is necessary to physical well-being, yet, making no time for it, and then becoming less and less inclined to it, they carry about a surplus quantity of fatty tissue and create health problems for themselves.

SMOKE, DRINK
EAT.
TOO
MUCH

They know that rest is necessary to physical well-being, that a regular amount of it is essential, but they push themselves hard, don't take enough time for relaxation or sleep. Lord Horder, the physician, said that at 20 we scoff at rest, at 40 we need it, at 60, we can't do without it. Nevertheless, there are people who flout what is a law of nature and seem to imagine they can do so with impunity.

Now, some of you may be saying to yourself that a physician ought to talk in such fashion, but why should a preacher? First, because there is a close connection between the body and the mind and the spirit. I believe the condition of the one affects the condition of the other. The old Romans knew it and emphasized that a sound body makes for a sound mind. Francis Bacon knew it and wrote, "A healthy body is the soul's guest chamber; a sick, it's prison." There are exceptions, of course, but the exceptions are not the rule.

In our day psychosomatic medicine is making it abundantly clear that physical well-being and mental and spiritual well-being are inter-related and inter-dependent. Overworked nerves are often due to underworked muscles. This is the reason why it is the preacher's business as well as the physicians to speak a cautioning word about the peril and penalty of going to seed physically.

Yet, there is another and more compelling reason. The proper care of the body is a Christian duty. Perhaps in your reading of the New Testament you have noticed the emphasis placed on the sacredness of the body as the Temple of the Holy Spirit. One thinks of those words of Paul taken from the 12th chapter of the Book of Romans: "Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service". Christ thought of the body as "the temple of God" - the dwelling place of the divine. And, I

feel that anyone who believes that his body is a temple of God will keep it fit - as fit and as disciplined as it can be kept.

Food and drink, exercise and rest, hygiene, housing, planned parenthood, ought not to be set outside the influence of our faith; they are as much a part of it as prayer and worship and daily business - and they vitally affect health and happiness, temper and temperament, and our whole way of looking at the world.

One of the saddest faces in literary portraiture is the face of Thomas Carlyle. Much of the sadness is explained by his outlook on life, but even more by his poor digestion. He himself recognized this, and once when he delivered an Address to the students of Edinburgh University, he concluded by saying:

"Finally, I have one advice to give you which is practically of very great importance. You are to consider throughout much more than is done at present, and what would have been a very great thing for me if I had been able to consider it, that health is a thing to be attended to continually; that you are to regard it as the very highest of all temporal things. There is no kind of achievement you could make in the world that is equal to perfect health. What to it are nuggests or millions."

Carlyle's is the practical, commonsense emphasis. The New Testament takes higher ground and offers a nobler incentive. "You are not your own; you are bought with a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and your spirit, which are His".

MENTALLY Now, in the second place, people are apt to coast and go downhill mentally. With advancing years some decline in mind even more than in body, and for no reason other than failure in self-discipline. They get into an intellectual rut, their ideas limited, their interests narrow, their outlook provincial and parochial.

Do you find that watching television takes less effort than going to a symphony or an art exhibition? Do you find that fiction makes pleasanter reading than books dealing with contemporary problems. A novelist makes one of his characters exclaim in irritation, "I am willing to fall in with anything that promises any good, but if I am to think, that is too much!"

Churchill: We are what we read.

Doctors say that many men and women in their forties ought not to be as flabby in muscle as they are. It is equal cause for shame to be flabby in mind. To read hardly anything beyond the newspaper and the professional periodicals necessary for one's business - this is to court mental stagnation, and where there is stagnation, deterioration is not far away. In our country the common poverty is mental rather than material; the majority of people are poor in ideas, in interests, in creative ways of using their increasing leisure.

A man who had thought what a good time he would have and how pleasant life would be when he retired, was hardly a month away from his business before he began to feel bored. He said to a friend, "I daren't retire to the country because I know I should be continually looking out the window and at my watch and

asking myself how long it was to the next meal". That sort of thing needn't have happened, and wouldn't have happened if as he grew older he had kept cultivating and developing his mind.

The point has been made that if Americans generally changed their intellectual fuel or re-charged their mental batteries with the same regularity they devote to changing motor oil or replacing old playing cards, there might be something like a renaissance in our country. You may think that an educator might be expected to talk like that, but not a the preacher. Simply because I believe that once there is a renaissance it is not long before there is a reformation. Because it is a distinct Christian duty to make the most of our mental powers. Because the mind like the body is God-given, is a sacred instrument to be cultivated and developed.

When Schleiermacher in the classroom at the University of Berlin kept on reiterating that feeling was the basic element in religion, Hegel, through the wall from him would expostulate, "But Gentlemen, to think is also a religious duty." It is good spiritual advice for a preacher to say to the members of his congregation; your duty as Christians is to enrich your minds, broaden your interests, keep yourselves intellectually alert."

In his autobiography, William Lyon Phelps wrote:

"In my life of professional teaching I have never endeavored to make young men more efficient; I have tried to make them more interesting. The business of the teacher is not to supply information; it is to raise a thirst. I like to hang pictures on the wall of the mind; I like to make it possible for a man to live with himself, so that he will not be bored with himself. For my own part, I live every day as if this were the first day I had ever seen and the last I were going to see."

Good
We have some in this congregation who would remind one of Phelps in this regard. ^{IV}any who show no sign of going to seed mentally. They have many interests, many causes that challenge the best in them, work that absorbs them, hobbies that relax them. They have discovered the world of wonder which music opens up, and art, and literature and religion. They're not sputtering in life's shallows concerned only with their own pleasures, taken up with trivia. They have intellectual interests apart from their business ones. They remind one of Thoreau. He did not need to go to London, or Paris, or Vienna, or Tokyo, or even - Boston. Concerning Walden, he said:

"I think the richest vein is somewhere hereabouts; so by the divining rod and their rising vapors I judge; and here I will begin to mine."

SPIRITUALLY And finally, we find that people are apt to coast and run downhill in terms of their spiritual lives. The poet Wordsworth thought this tendency was inevitable and universal. Recall his words:

"Trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison house begin to close

Upon the growing boy;
But he beholds the light and whence it flows
He sees it in his joy;
The youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is nature's priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length, the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day."

And that, when that happens, is one of the tragedies of life. Idealism dies. Skepticism takes its place. Cynicism takes hold. Apathy enters in. With the whitening of the hair there goes a bleaching of the spirit. The soul, instead of maturing, becomes a wizened, shrunken thing. This is the danger that confronts each of us. Whatever we may have gained from life - there is so much that we have lost - the "first fine careless rapture" - the openness, the innocence, the trustfulness; the Bible a closed Book gathering dust on the shelf, the thrill of worship gone. Prayer resorted to in only an emergency.

I believe there is a loss more deadly than the loss of physical vigor, sadder than the decay of mental power. It is the withering of the soul by almost imperceptible decline. "Samson wist not that the spirit of the Lord had departed from him". He was a great hulk of a man, a prey to seduction, and he didn't know it.

Therefore Jesus said, "You must be born again". And "unless you turn around and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven". We can be born again. We don't have to go to seed spiritually. As Paul put it, "though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature can be renewed day by day".

It will not be renewed if we have plenty of time to watch television, but none to say our prayers. There's the rub. How can we expect to thrive spiritually, if we starve our souls? It was said of an old man that his face was like an ancient chapel, with all the lamps lighted for evening worship. Few grow old as he did without nurturing their soul. The care of the body is a Christian duty. So, too, is the cultivation of the mind. But the "soul of all improvement is the improvement of the soul". "He who has ears to hear, let him hear".

PRAYER Help us to guard against the dangers of coasting, Lord God.
In this season of growth, may we grow as individuals - in mind, in body, in spirit.