

## "WHEN LOYALTIES CONFLICT"

INTRODUCTION The sermon today is about loyalty, specifically the conflict of loyalties. Certainly you would agree with me when I say that loyalty is one of the royal virtues of life. He who is without it lacks a quality indispensable to true character. And loyalty is not just a personal quality. It is the cement of our society. In every realm - the home, the church, the nation, the community of nations - loyalty is what holds human life together, giving it cohesiveness and solidarity. Without it, these institutions would fall apart.

PROBLEM: CONFLICTING LOYALTIES The problem for many people is not how to be loyal, but rather how to deal with conflicting loyalties. We know how to be faithful to love, to duty, to vows, to obligations. We encounter some difficulty, however, when we find the loyalties of our lives coming into conflict.

We're reminded of that scene in the Old Testament where Naaman, the Syrian, cleansed of his leprosy, swore that he would thenceforth be loyal to the God of Israel, but he had hardly done so before he realized that when he went back to Syria he would have to go with his master in the line of duty into the temple of Rimmon, and when his master bowed down to worship Rimmon, he would be expected to do likewise. One can sympathize with Naaman's dilemma. On the one hand there was the duty he owed to the God of Israel and the duty he owed to his monarch, the King of Syria, on the other hand. Thus the phrase, "Bowing down in the house of Rimmon" has become a proverbial expression to point up the danger and the dishonesty associated with compromise. Yet, when the various loyalties of our lives come into conflict, what is one to do and how is one to avoid compromise?

EXAMPLE: CONFLICTING LOYALTIES It may be a conflict of loyalties in the course of the day's business. For instance, an employee is asked to do something that his conscience does not approve. Dependent on him and on his earnings are his wife and children. What is he to do? Register a protest? Give up the job? Keep silent? Tell himself that the employer is responsible, not the employee?

John Woolman, that great Quaker spirit of the 18th century, tells of an incident in his journal that took place in 1742:

"My employer, having a Negro woman, sold her, and desired me to write a bill of sale, the man being waiting who brought her. The thing was sudden; and though I felt uneasy at the thought of writing an instrument of slavery for one of my fellow-creatures, yet I remember that I was hired by the year, that it was my master who directed me to do it, and that it was an elderly man, a member of our Society, who bought her; so through weakness I gave way and wrote it; but at the executing of it I was so afflicted in my mind, that I said before my master and the friend that I believed slave keeping to be a practice inconsistent with the Christian religion. This, in some degree, abated my uneasiness; yet as often as I reflected seriously upon it I thought I should have been clearer if I had desired to be excused from it, as a thing against my conscience; for such it was."

The conflict of loyalties takes place in a time of war. How many young men have wrestled inwardly with conflicting loyalties as they have gone into some branch of the armed forces - loving life and loving country, hating war, hating the thought of having to learn how to kill another human. What a fierce and terrible conflict it can be. The law of the land is that every able bodied man must fight to defend his country; the law of God is "Thou shalt not kill"

Remember that unforgettable scene in the movie, "The Cruel Sea" where the captian of the ship was caught up in this dilemma of conflicting loyalties, called upon to drop a depth charge among his own men struggling in oily cold Atlantic waters in order to sink a German U Boat. Remember his anguish of mind as afterwards he said: "I suppose you must just go on and do what you have to do - and say your prayers".

### HARD TO BE A CHRISTIAN

Thus far I have been doing no more than stating the case, showing how a conflict of loyalties may arise in the course of the day's business, in wartime, in a Christian's relation to his country or his government when violence is done to Christian principle. Even so, just to state the problem is to render a service. It is easier, of course, to pose the problem than it is to suggest a solution. There are no simple solutions. It is hard to be a Christian.

For instance, when should one obey and when should one defy a law which one on soul and conscience believes to be unwise or even morally wrong. It is easy to say that the voice of conscience should be supreme. But are there not differences between an instructed and an uninstructed conscience. It is easy to say that no man made law should over-ride the dictacts of conscience. But some deference is due to established authority else lawlessness will be the result. How and where and when should the line be drawn?

Is it ever right to tell a lie? Are there instances when a lie is justified? What about the person - the sick person - whose health may be further jeopardized by a truthful answer to his inquiry concerning his own well being. Even as I raise the question, I think of Carlyle's thundering reply:

"Truth! though the heavens crush me for following. No Falsehood! though a whole celestial lubberland were the price of apostasy."

But I think, too, of the saintly Bishop in Victor Hugo's great novel coolly fabricating a lie to save a thief from ~~arrest~~ and saying to Him:

"Jean Valjean, my brother, you belong no longer to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition and I give it to God".

For this saintly Bishop, the virtue of truth was related to the virtues of justice and mercy. He saw that facts could actually get in the way of truth. And if you pass judgment not on the bishop's action but on his motives, you will let him go uncondemned.

Is it always possible to do what is ideally right? Perhaps at some time in your life you have found yourself in the position where, through no fault of your own, there has seemed to be no right course open to you - only a choice between two evils.

This is the situation that Chamberlain faced in the late 1930's at Munich before Hitler. Rather than take his country into war, Chamberlain tried appeasement for the sake of keeping the peace. It was a compromise and there is rarely anything idealistic about a compromise. You probably criticize him. History already has. Yet Chamberlain, born and bred in Unitarianism, was probably no lover of compromise. A policy of appeasement is not heroic. History points this up to us.

So often in life it seems that the choice is not between black and white, but rather between differing shades of gray. However, a Christian will not make this an excuse for lowering his standards and conforming to the ways of the world. He will not give up trying to apply his Christianity to everyday life. He will strive to act as nobly as possible in every situation - in wartime, in race relations, in the fiercely competitive world of business, seeking always to select the better of two alternatives. By so doing he will not only cultivate a worthy character, but will do his part in building up a better state of society in the future so that things impossible for him may be possible for the future generations to come.

#### NO SIMPLE SOLUTIONS

We often hear sayings like "one step at a time" and "half a loaf of bread is better than none". These are not necessarily sayings of worldly prudence. Those who by nature are idealistic get impatient with such expressions. But doesn't it often happen that the idealist after having spoken forthrightly about an evil situation will often withdraw into his ivory tower. Two global wars and the present state of the world ought to have taught us that the human conditions for ideal solutions that are neat and tidy for the national and international problems that face us are not yet present. As Christian people we shall serve our generation most by seizing on whatever of good the situation of the moment makes possible. And by vigilant and practical use of each concrete opportunity for improvement and reform, we can lift society to a higher level.

#### THE EXAMPLE OF TEMPLE

I know of no Christian of recent times who was more concerned in applying Christianity to everyday life - to business, politics, questions of war and peace, national and international problems - than William Temple. But if he had his head in the clouds, he also had his feet on the ground. He was what you would call a practical Christian statesman. He believed that Christian principles would be workable if a sufficient number of people would get behind them and he accepted the fact that by and large people don't get behind them, and he joined hands with them to secure the lesser good they were willing to support. He worked with his fellows for the second best when they were not ready to work for the best. He preferred to achieve in cooperation with them an attainable goal, while at the same time he kept pointing them to the supreme good. He once said this:

"It is certainly a mistake to begin with the picture of a supposedly ideal system and try to establish it. The way of Christian progress is to ask where an existing system is breaking down and readjust it in the light of Christian principle."

If this be compromise, it is, as with the Bishop in Victor Hugo's novel, a compromise of action and not of ideals.

#### COMPROMISE HAS ITS LIMITS

But even so - compromise has its limits. What those limits are each of us must find out in each case for himself - keeping before us continually the example and spirit of Jesus of Nazareth. We should be on guard, prayerfully and constantly, against the lowering of standards and a cowardly compliance with the demands of self-interest and worldliness. We should be on our guard, prayerfully and constantly, lest a minor loyalty lead us to sacrifice a major one. This is something each of us must work to avoid - a little loyalty to one's family, one's profession, one's class, one's race - pressed at the expense of a larger and greater loyalty. Jesus had much to say about that. "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me". Devoted to our family, but unconcerned about other families. Devoted to our nation, but caring little about other nations. Devoted to our denomination, but isolated from, if not critical of, our brethren in other denominations.

LOYALTY TO GOD

First, last and always - we must remember that our supreme loyalty is to God....to God who has revealed himself and the ideals of human life in Jesus Christ. To him we give our loyalty and our allegiance. From him we take our pattern of life . This leads us inevitably to certain choices when we find the loyalties of life in conflict.

John Gunther tells us that whenever he visits a country and asks about the leading political personality and talks to him, he tries to focus on two questions: what are the real sources of power behind the man, and what does he believe in most?

Who do you believe in most? When the choice of loyalties in your own life narrows down, in what direction does it point? Think about it. Your self? Your family? Your profession? Your nation? Your church? God? In what direction does it point?

LET US PRAY

As we are born and raised in the shelter of local loyalties, help us, O God, as we grow to also grow up into greater loyalties. And when the time comes to make a choice, give to us the courage and the strength to make our decision on the basis of life's greatest loyalty of all - our loyalty to Thee who hast revealed thyself to us in the man we call Christ. In his spirit we pray. Amen