

"WHEN OUR SPIRITS ARE LOW"

INTRODUCTION The sermon today begins with the observation that in order to grow in self-understanding and self-mastery, we have to learn how to deal with the ebb and flow of feeling in our inner life.

We know that human nature, like the weather, is essentially variable. We have our good days. We have our bad days. One morning we jump out of bed and tackle our work with enthusiasm. The following day we may have to drive ourselves and push ourselves to it and getting it done is an effort. The words of the spiritual strike a responsive note in us because they describe our case: "Sometimes I'm up and sometimes I'm down - Oh, yes - Lord!"

DEVELOPMENT Many persons tend to fret over these changing tides of feeling within themselves. They may develop a guilt complex about them, or perhaps make heavier demands upon themselves. We need to recognize that we are battling against a law of life which is universal in its scope. There's no need for us to fret or be humiliated or develop guilt feelings.

I think we need to be reminded from time to time that the road of life we are called on to travel is not a level, smooth road, with the sun shining on it all the time - but rather it's more of a succession of hills, plains and valleys. It's in the nature of things for us to have our high days and low days. That's the way we are made. And instead of fretting and fussing, the course of wisdom lies in teaching ourselves to recognize and accept this rhythm of our inner life.

Experience soon makes clear to us that low spirited hours are dangerous hours. Where the fight for character is concerned, we are always vulnerable - but we are especially vulnerable when fatigue, inertia and depression take hold.

A sentence in the Old Testament illustrates this point. An enemy of David said to his fellow conspirators,

"I will set out and pursue David tonight; I will come upon him while he is weary and discouraged, and throw him into a panic."

The enemy of souls is a ~~past~~ master in that kind of strategem. He is seldom far away in our zero hours. A low spirited person is a person with his guard down. It is then that he is apt to act out of character, fall below his best, say things and do things that afterwards he deplors. This is why zero hours should never be our decision making hours. When you are in them, be cautious about passing judgement on yourself or others. Some advice my father gave me as a growing boy comes to my mind:

"Never make your decisions at night when your energies are at their lowest. Make them in the early morning hours after a good night's sleep."

KEEP THEM TO YOURSELF Now, there can be no creative acceptance of life's emotional rhythms unless we find ways of handling our bad days. Let me suggest several things to work on. First of all, one should make addetermined effort to keep them to one's self. Be careful about going out and advertising the fact. The fact that we are dispirited gives us no right to make our neighbors dispirited and yet - how often we do this!

How often we share our black moods with others, thus putting them into a dark mood. We need to remember that other people are fighting a hard battle; they, too, have their ups and downs. When we mingle with them we owe them the duty of cheerfulness.

I read somewhere sometime ago that among the regulations for the officers of the British Navy there is this point:

"Every officer is to avoid saying or doing anything which might discourage the men or render them dissatisfied with their conditions or with the service in which they are or may be employed."

Here is a regulation each of us would do well to make our own - something to follow in our work, in our Church life, in our home - to keep our black moods and critical attitudes and our inner frustrations to ourselves and not go about spreading them out where others will see them and pick them up. Someone has said: "Never display a wound except to a physician". If you have a wound, don't forget the Great Physician.

I think the truly courageous and heroic person is the soul who is reluctant to make an emotional indulgence or display of his or her trouble. Courageous souls are adept in concealing them. Robert Louis Stevenson, for example, plagued with sickness throughout his lifetime, but in his family circle offering this beautiful, simple prayer in the morning hours of each day:

"Call us up with morning faces and with morning hearts -
eager to be happy, if happiness shall be our portion - and
if the day be marked for sorrow, strong to endure!"

FAITHFUL IN OUR DAILY TASKS

In the second place, in dealing with our bad days we should also make it a point of honor to be faithful in the performance of our daily tasks and duties.

I think the pull at such times is most apt to be in the opposite direction. The tendency is to be lethargic, careless, slack, irresponsible. However, when we permit ourselves to go that way our despondency increases and our gloomy introspection. So much of our low-spiritedness is due to self-absorption. What we usually need is something that will take our minds off of ourselves.

Nothing serves that purpose as well as work. "Work's a blessing" as they say. There was a time when doctors sent their fashionable patients off for a rest cure. Nowadays it is recognized that in nine cases out of ten a work cure will do far more good. Rest and quiet often intensify low spiritedness. "Go and lie down" may be poor advice. "Go out and do something kind for someone else" is better advice.

One way to get out of zero hours is to persevere, whether we feel like it or not, to persevere conscientiously and doggedly in the carrying out of our appointed tasks. "Perspiration precedes inspiration." When you leave undone those things you know you ought to do, when you neglect responsibility, evade your duty, putting self and self-indulgence before duty and service, you are heading deeper into the pits of depression.

Listen to this judgement offered by a man in the medical profession:

"In all conditions of life and all the varied situations in which an individual may be placed, in periods of monotony and boredom, or in times of storm and stress, in all the varied fortunes and misfortunes that meet the individual, when opportunity is lost, when disheartened by failure, even in conditions of distress and despair, the day's work is the one consolation; and with habits of coordinated activity, of mental and physical work developed from childhood, one has always an anchor of safety whatever the mental chaos and distraction."

RESOURCE OF FAITH

First, learn to keep the dark days to yourself. Second, be faithful to the daily tasks and responsibilities. And third, remember there is still another anchor - an anchor of the soul - sure and steadfast.

Through changes of circumstance and fortune, we can school ourselves to ~~live~~ ^{LIVE} in reliance on the resources of God, and of faith in His power and purpose. We can make our prayer that ancient prayer: "Heal Me at the Center and Let the World Come In". We can root ourselves, ground ourselves in the faith that God is love, that He will never leave us nor forsake us, that He knows the way and that His hold is on us at all time.

The faith in God that proves to be a real anchor in our lives is seldom come by easily. It is the result of disciplined effort - the result of our cultivation of spiritual habits.

Perhaps part of the reason our faith is not more meaningful is that we do so little to cultivate it. A recent analysis points out to us:

"That the average person of 70 has spent -

3 years in education,
8 years in amusement,
6 years in eating,
11 years in working,
24 years in sleeping,
5½ years in washing, dressing,
6 years in walking
3 years in conversation
3 years in reading,
and
6 months in worshipping God."

No wonder then that our faith is not more dynamic. The casual, haphazard approach never produces anything vital.

Our greatest need is to develop and strengthen our trust in God. To live without faith is to be out of our native element, inadequate for the pressures and responsibilities that crowd upon us. Out of our native element because God has made us for himself and our hearts are bound to be restless till they find their rest in Him. If we are to see clearly and act wisely and live courageously, we must learn to stay our souls on God. The lines of the poet Whittier have long been among my favorite lines of poetry. They speak to our restless hearts:

"I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care."

PRAYER

Make us conscious, dear God, of your enfolding presence, of your eternal love, of your acceptance of us just as we are. Speak the word of forgiveness of all of our sins and empower us for the tasks of another week.

In the spirit and name of Jesus, our Lord, we pray. Amen"

Such a faith is an anchor in our lives when our spirits are downcast and our days are filled with darkness and despair.