"WHEN YOU'RE UP AGAINST IT"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION There was once a business executive who retired without the opportunity to give advice or leave instructions for his successor. What he did was to leave four envelopes to be opened in turn whenever a crisis arose. Before long the new executive faced his first crisis. He turned to the first envelope for advice. He opened it and read, "Blame your predecessor". In time a second crisis developed. And he opened the second envelope, and the message was, "Form a committee". Now everybody knows that won't help so things got worse. He picked up the third envelope, opened it and read the following advice, "Fire some subordinates". That helped a little, but finally one day the fourth crisis came, the worst one of all. He was really up against it now. He had one envelope left, so he nervously ripped it open, pulled out the instructions which read, "Start making out four envelopes".

DEVELOPMENT What do you do when you face a crisis? - when you're really up against it?

One day the disciples of Jesus found themselves in that kind of a situation. Jesus had gone up to the mountain with Peter and James and John where they were enveloped in that tremendous event called The Transfiguration. It was the high point of His career, the confirmation of His Messiahship. When Jesus came down from the mountain He discovered that the disciples were embroiled in a heated discussion with the Scribes.

Jesus was at the height of His popularity now and the disciples shared in that glory, so wherever they went they were sure to be recognized. They were celebrities. Entering this town they were recognized as disciples of the great Healer and called to heal son of the most prominent man in town. They tried to heal the boy and failed. They tried everything they knew, but the more they tried the worse, the more embarrassing the situation became. Finally this prominent man called for the authorities, the Scribes, to reprimand these disciples for appearing as healers, as impostors. That's the scene that Jesus encounters as He comes down from the mountain.

I've often thought of it in the image of that old story of the sorcerer's apprentice. When the sorcerer returns, you remember, he finds the apprentice literally over his head in the mess that his magic has created. His apprentice knew enough magic to make a mess of things, but not enough to do any good. I picture Jesus coming into that scene like the sorcerer, looking at his disciples with a disgusted look, taking charge, and with one word changing the chaos into order. That's the scene.

At the end come these words, "....His disciples asked Him privately, 'Why could we not cast it out? What couldn't we do it?' And Jesus said to them, 'This kind cannot be driven out by anything but prayer'".

SOME THINGS HANDLED WITHOUT PRAYER What do you do when you face a crisis? What do you do when you're really up against it? Do you pray? That's the question I want us to consider this morning with this story from Mark's Gospel in the background as our text.

First of all I want you to notice that the incident implies that there are some things that can be handled without prayer. If Jesus says, "This is the kind

of thing that can be handled only by prayer", the inference is that there are things we can do without any divine intervention, things we can do under our own power, some things our common sense and a bit of courage can probably handle.

That's consistent with my understanding of mature Christian faith. I believe that God wants us to have an adult relationship with Him, if we're adults. Even in religion. To be an adult means to stand on your own two feet, to make your own decisions, to take responsibility for your own actions. A childish dependence on God is where you won't take responsibility for what you've done. You say, "Look, the Lord made me do it" - or something like that. There are still those who look upon religion that way. They say that they don't do anything without God leading them to do it, or telling them to do it.

On a television tape I saw some people at a textbook hearing. A woman appeared before that State Board to protest the inclusion of a certain text book in the state curriculum. She began her testimony by saying, "First of all, I want to tell you that I am here today because God told me to come here today". Well, maybe, but I have trouble with that; it can't be proved. God apparently didn't tell anybody else there, "Behold, this is my spokesperson in whom I am well pleased". And her testimony was just what others had said who held the same opinion, only they weren't claiming divine inspiration for it. So the conclusion you're left with is that this woman didn't want to debate the issue or question. How are you going to argue with God?

An adolescent does something that he shouldn't have done and his parents want to teach him to take responsibility for his life. They want to enable him or her to grow up and to mature. He wants them to intervene for him. He wants them to smooth things out for him. But if they're conscientious parents, they won't do it. They want their children to grow up. And so they'll say, "You got into it, you get out of it. You go make amends. You go apologize. You pay for it. You do something. You take responsibility for your own actions, because that's what it means to be an adult."

I think God treats us at least as wisely as a good parent. I think He wants us, those of us who've grown up, to be adults, even in religion. And to be an adult means that you stand on your own two feet and you're responsible for your own actions. That's why I'm partial to that old story about George Washington Carver. He worked all those experiments on the peanut and finally in exasperation he prayed, "O God, help me to find the answer". And God said, "I gave you brains; use them". "You find it".

I like that. That's my idea of a mature understanding of Christian discipleship. I can't believe that God would want us dependent upon Him in ways that our understanding of human maturity would label neurotic. I think there are some things we are to do without divine intervention, and to pray for God's intervention at such a time is to trivialize prayer and manipulate God.

WHEN DO YOU PRAY So, when do you pray? There are many times when you pray, and there are many opportunities for praying and many kinds of prayer. But I want us to take a second look at those instances that are mentioned in our two scripture lessons for today. They're quite clear. They say that when you are up against it you should pray. When you have come to the end of your rope, the end of your resources, when you have done all that you can do and it is still not enough, then you get down on your knees and you pray!

Remember that term, "foxhole religion". It used to be used pejoratively to describe soldiers in the war who were not religious until the bombs began to fall. They never prayed in their life until their life was threatened. Some people spoke disparagingly of foxhole religion as if it were second class religion, as if it were inauthentic. But I don't feel that way about it. I believe that it is the most authentically human thing to do when you're up against it. When you're really up against it, there is something inside you that reaches out for some power beyond yourself.

I read back in September that a man fell off one of those Texas Towers in the Gulf of Mexico. He treaded water for 15 hours before being rescued. Can you imagine that? Fifteen hours. The paper didn't say whether or not he prayed during that time, but I know I would have. Foxhole religion. When you're up against it, you can't help but pray. That's why Jesus answered the question of the disciples, "Why couldn't we do it? We tried everything we knew." And He said: "You didn't pray".

WHAT DO YOU PRAY? The next question is, "Then what do you pray?" And for this we turn to Jeremiah. Jeremiah was always up against it and he was not reticent to complain about it, either. He had so many laments that they couldn't get them all in to the Book of Lamentations which was his own published book of all of his complaints. They had to put some of them in his biography; that's called the Book of Jeremiah from which Bob Smith read this morning. Jeremiah complains he's like a lamb being led to the slaughter. He complains that all the people around him betray him and are against him. But note this that he ends up with these words, "To Thee have I committed my cause".

It's the prayer of those who have done their best and there's nothing more they can do. The prayer of Jesus on the cross was a rendition of Jeremiah's prayer. "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit". The meaning of that prayer is,

> "I have done all I can and I am turning it over to you now. It's not done, but I've done all I can....'To Thee I have commited my cause'".

WHEN WE ARE FINISHED, GOD ISN'T The point of these texts is, when we are finished, God isn't. When we have come to the end of our power, God hasn't. That's why Paul says in his writings that you're not going to be saved by your own efforts, by your own works, by your own power. You're going to be saved by God's grace. And why - when Jeremiah comes to the end of another terrible day - he says, "To Thee I have commited my cause". Then he can get a good night's sleep. That's why Jesus told His disciples,

> "Look...you're going to run into situations where you're going to be up against it. Don't try stubbornly to do it all by yourself. Don't keep hammering your head against the wall. When you're finished, God isn't. Remember that and pray Jeremiah's prayer...'To thee...I.. have commited my cause'".

You see, to believe in God means that if you can't do it, it doesn't mean it isn't going to get done. There are two pieces of evidence for this. The first the more dramatic evidence of the testimony of those who have been up

against it in their lives and have cried out to God and received help.

I came across such a testimony last week. It was given by a professor in a college in Colorado. Periodically this man would go on a drinking binge. His family begged him to stop, but he blamed his family for nagging him all the time. One night he stormed out of the house to drink in a bar. When the bar closed he bought a six pack of beer and drank in his car. He happened to park by a graveyard and when you do anything next to a graveyard it always brings a note of sobriety into the situation, I suppose. After sleeping for a while he woke up feeling terrible. He cried out to God in prayer, "If you exist, if you are here, come and help me". And in that case, that's all that was needed. He said, "I saw no flashing lights and no voice spoke to me. But I did experience a great calm. I knew that Jesus was alive, that He cared for me, that He has always been searching for me." And from that moment on he has been sober.

He found strength beyond his own strength after he had exhausted his own strengths. What he had could be cast out only by prayer. If you can't do it, it doesn't mean that it isn't going to get done.

PROVIDENCE IN OUR LIVES The second piece of evidence of that power beyond our own that we call Providence working in our lives is not so dramatic in its manifestation, but it's experienced by all of us and it is seen by the more sensitive of us, most of the mature people who can look back over a long life and see that they have not walked it alone. One such person put it this way,

> "If you do nothing, nothing will happen. If you do something, what happens won't necessarily be the result of what you have done."

I like that. You can do nothing and nothing will happen. If you do something, what happens won't necessarily be the result of what you have done.

Parents know that. You've got to do your best job as a parent, but you can't control your children. What happens to them won't necessarily be the result of what you have done.

And physicians will tell you the same thing about the art of healing. They do something. They use the best knowledge, the best skills they have. They use the best science available. But what happens in healing is not always the result of what they did. Another power takes over, as it were.

Preachers know this, too. People talk about preachers being inspired, but that's not quite accurate. Sometimes I think that the inspiration given to preachers is to work hard, to study, to do their homework and to be faithful in their preparation and their pastoring. The inspiration is not necessarily what comes out of the preacher. The inspiration is what happens in the heart of the listener.

Any preacher can tell this story. A p rishioner comes up, say a month after a sermon was preached, and thanks him for the sermon. "It made a difference. It turned my life around" he says. "And I want you to know that especially when you said this or that". And you didn't say "this or that". You did say something, but what happens in preaching is not necessarily the result of what the preacher said.

And finally, artists talk about that same dimension of mystery in what they do. As Jan Sibelius once said,

> "The final form of one's work is, of course, dependent on powers that are stronger than oneself. Later on, one can confirm this or that...but on the whole one is merely the tool. This wonderful logic, call it God, if you will, that governs a work of art, is still the conclusive factor over which one has no control".

"If you do nothing, nothing is going to happen. If you do something, what happens won't necessarily be the result of what you have done." So the disciples one day long ago asked Jesus, "Why couldn't we do it. We tried everything. We gave it everything we had. Why couldn't we do it?" And Jesus said, "You were up against it. You should have prayed. You should have prayed Jeremiah's prayer, 'To Thee I have commited my cause'". It makes a difference, especially when you're really up against it!

PRAYER We are conscious, O God, of our spiritual weakness. Help us to renew our energies which we need if we are to drive out the things that afflict us. Help us to take time apart from the world of busy activity, and ground us so deeply in the things that we really believe so that when Jesus lifts us up, we shall be able to stand on our own feet. In the strong name of Christ, we pray. Amen