

WHEN YOUR SINS GET YOU DOWN

INTRODUCTION

You may have noticed from your order of worship that the sermon this morning moves off in a rather somewhat different and unusual direction. It has to do with sin, and I have entitled it "When Your Sins Get You Down". As I was preparing this sermon this past week, I was reminded of something that happened to a ministerial friend of mine who accepted an invitation to preach at a rather well-known prison located to the north of this city. It seems that as he was sitting in the chaplain's office waiting for the service to begin he remarked to the chaplain that he wasn't at all sure as to what to say to the congregation of convicts. The chaplain suggested that he go ahead and preach to them just as he would preach to the members of his own congregation, "but" he added, "remember this one thing - my people have been found out and yours haven't."

We smile at the story. I'm sure he was exaggerating, and yet in light of the recent developments in the television industry, I'm not so sure but that there might be some truth involved in his observation. Anyway our subject this morning is certainly one of contemporary significance. To be sure, it may speak to some of you of the saw dust trail and the revival tent. Nothing wrong with that. And it may be too as I speak to you on this subject that you'll see some people you know fitting into the situation. Who knows, you might even see yourself which reminds me of the woman who came up to the minister at the door following the service one Sunday morning and said, "Pastor that was a wonderful sermon. Everything you said applies to somebody or other that I know".

DEVELOPMENT

Seriously, however, I have chosen a text for this sermon this morning. It is from the 40th psalm, the 15th verse:

"My sins have taken such hold upon me that I am not able to look up; yea, they are more in number than the hairs of my head, and my heart has failed me....."

Those words, of course, were written long, long ago by a man whose sins apparently had gotten him down. I think as we hear those words, or read them for ourselves, we are apt to say something like this: "Well thank goodness we've gotten away from that sort of thing. We no longer weep or wail about our sins. To be sure, we sin. We do things that are not right. We hedge a bit here and there. We make a few mistakes along the way, but our sins, for the most part, don't really get us down. We've learned to take them in stride; we've learned how to live with them, and if we get upset about them, we soon quiet ourselves by saying after all we're human beings and no one is perfect." And then we close our eyes and go to sleep.

Now I'm afraid that that isn't the complete picture; that doesn't represent the entire story. It isn't quite correct for me to suggest to you that people in this day and age never get upset over their sins. I've seen too many instances where people have gotten quite upset over their sins, their mistakes, their failures to suggest that to you. For all I know there may be some people here this morning who are here because in a very real sense, their sins have gotten them down. Mind you there are times when our sins take such a hold upon us that we cannot look up, times when our sins become so frequent and so serious that they threaten to explode a normal personality.

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TO BE MORE SPECIFIC

Perhaps it would help if I were to be more specific. What I have in mind is something like this. Let's begin with the obvious sins of self-indulgence. There are many things in which a person can over indulge himself. I think it's safe for me to say that the two most common ones in America today are alcohol and sex. A person can over-indulge himself in one or the other, or perhaps in some instances, both. In the beginning it may be only occasionally. In the beginning, it may not bother you a great deal or affect your general pattern of living. But for some people it may come to the point where this over-indulgence becomes so frequent and the consequences so obviously serious that they threaten to monopolize your whole life, to color your thoughts, to motivate all of your actions, and to distract you from other things that you may have been interested in all of your life, and then it is that you find your situation akin to that of the psalmist who said: "My sins are more in number than the hairs of my head, and my heart doth fail me". Oh to be sure, you don't put it in those words, but this is the way you begin to feel. Over-indulgence in alcohol or in sex have brought many Americans to that point.

Or consider, if you will, the serious sins of spiritual failure. For instance, you want to be a Christian in the sense that you want to be an effective channel of God's love in the world. You want to care; you want to be involved in the lives of others. And what bothers you is this that there are times when you are not a Christian in the best sense. You find that you have a growing dislike for some particular person. He bothers you; you have no feeling for him - no love for him, no sympathy for him. I suppose this happens occasionally to all of us. But if, however, all of this gets to the point where you find yourself habitually becoming scornful of others, critical of others and indifferent to the feelings of others, cynical about life in general, sneering at those who are trying to live the good life, then it is that you are experiencing the sins of spiritual failure, and it may be that one day you will face yourself and say "My sins have taken such hold upon me that I cannot look up". Instead of growing in love, you're shrinking. Instead of becoming a successful Christian, you've become an unsuccessful one.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

When you get to that point, when your sins begin to cause you deep concern and you wonder what you can do....it seems to me there are two things you can do.

FIRST of all, you can thank God that you've come to that point. That is, that you've come to that point that you're concerned with your mistakes and your failures. A person, of course, who never arrives at that point is something like the navigator who neither cares nor knows where he is going and who has thrown his compass overboard. Let me say this to you. It may bring some of you some reassurance. If your sins (or whatever you wish to call them), if your sins never get you down, you can be sure of this that you are beginning to lose that unique gift of sensitivity to that which is good and high and beautiful. Thank God that you are still the kind of person who can be depressed by your mistakes.

SECOND, you can ask God to help you. If you're in some real kind of trouble, then it is perfectly possible that you can't handle the situation entirely by yourself. You may want to. I suppose we all want to, because most of us don't like other people to know too much about our inner lives. Anyway as you begin to take these things

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seriously, you need to say to yourself: "This is a little more than I can handle by myself. I need some outside help, and the help I need is nothing short of divine help."

And nine times out of ten, God will send to you a person to whom you can talk, a person to whom you can tell the whole story. It may be a friend. Or it may be a doctor. It may be a minister. You may be the type of person who finds it easier to talk to a friend because you're meeting him on common ground. On the other hand, a doctor or a minister has the advantage of training and experience. They have dealt with many human beings in trouble and they will listen to you and understand what you say against the background of a wide and varied experience. You can trust them and they will hold your confidences.

SEVERAL THINGS WILL HAPPEN

As you talk things over with someone, you'll discover that several things will happen. For one thing, you'll find that the situation will be clarified. It's the type of thing that happens when you have a difficult problem to solve, and you're not sure as to what the solution is. It's vague and abstract until you set it down on paper, and then it becomes clear. In some instances, you may discover that the situation isn't as bad as you thought it was. In other cases, you may find, and I'm sorry to say this, you may find that the situation is much more serious than you thought it was - that it goes deeper, is more basic, that it has a firmer grip on you and as a result it will be much more difficult for you to deal with.

As the other person listens, if he is a good listener, and has been trained to listen to things like this, you will find that this happens. You'll lose your fear of being cast out. I suppose every person who has done something wrong has a fear of being cast out. I see this in my own son when he goes over to the back of the Hi-Fi set and begins to pull the wires out of it. He's reprimanded for it, and when he's made to realize that he's done something wrong, we detect a fear on his part of being cast out or cut off. (Unfortunately however, in his case, the fear must not be too great for he continues to do it). Anyway as you share the things that have been pressing in on your mind, you'll begin to lose some of that fear of being cast out and cut off. As your counsellor listens to you, you will know, even though you may not be conscious of it at the moment, that there is at least one person who knows all about you and yet who does not cast you out. He neither condones what you have done nor condemns you for doing it. And I think when you begin to encounter this, whether you meet it in a person, or whether you meet it on the pages of the New Testament, you have encountered the mercy of God. You have experienced something of the divine reality that loves the sinner, but not the sin. I think that's worth repeating it. God loves the sinner, but not the sin. This is the love that forgives and redeems and heals.

JUST WHAT IS SIN

Thus far this morning, I have not yet given you a definition of sin. I suppose it's always good to define the things we're talking about, and whenever it comes to a definition of sin, I'm reminded of the experience of one minister who asked one of the ladies in the church what she thought of his sermon on the preceding Sunday. She replied, "Oh Reverend it was such a wonderful message. So inspiring and so instructive. We really didn't know what sin was until you came here". Seriously however, it seems

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that sin is selfishness in one form or another, and this selfishness breeds separation. It brings separation from other people, from God, from life. It cuts you off, and the more that your life turns in upon yourself and around yourself, the more you find yourself separated from the life of humanity, from your friends, your family and from God.

THINGS TO DO

But going back once again to the person you have been talking to, you'll find he will probably suggest certain things for you to do. You know as well as I do that if you are going to make any progress in this sort of thing, you'll have to do more than just talk about it. I can't begin to suggest to you what he will advise you to do, because it will vary with the situation, but I would like to make one or two general suggestions that may be of some help to you.

FIRST of all, remember this, that you cannot conquer whatever it is that is preventing you from becoming a better person by concentrating upon it. The more you concentrate upon it, the more you have a thing in mind, the deeper it will be driven into your life, and the deeper the scar will become. Do you see what I'm driving at. In other words, you can't always conquer something by concentrating upon it. It's only when you are conquered by something or some one who will gradually displace it. There is no rule or regulation which will get you out of the web of that habit that is gradually destroying your life. It is not any discipline of your own, although it involves discipline. You are extricated from that web of strangling threads when something takes hold of you that gradually either displaces or controls the thing that has been causing you so much concern.

AND THE SECOND thing to remember is this and it is closely related to the first thing. You have to immerse yourself in the image of the type of person you would like to be. You have to feed yourself the sort of life that you would like to live and then forget it. You let that spirit that is positive and affirmative, that spirit that can capture your imagination and draw out all the bigness in your soul, you let that spirit which is the Spirit of Christ, gradually take possession of your life. This is the secret. Feeding your heart and mind on the Christ Spirit. It won't be complete. It may not be right away. It may take some time. You will never be perfect, but that Spirit will keep sending you out into the lives of other people, saying something like this: Go into those lives and try to do for them what somebody has done for you.

When your sins get you down, thank God for it. Ask him to help you. Then forget whatever it is that's been strangling your life. Lose yourself in someone else. Let the spirit of Christ live within you.

LET US PRAY: God, Our Father, never let us be content with the kind of person we are. Save us from a morbid preoccupation with our faults, and stir our hearts and our minds with the vision of Him whose goodness and beauty and truth will lead us toward the lives of other people that we may grow to be better than we are. We ask this in thy name. Amen

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