

"WHY BOTHER ABOUT CHURCH?"

TEXT: "He who hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Matthew 13: 9

Roger William Riis, a distinguished American author, was for many years a critic and a scoffer of the church. And then one day he went to church. It happened to be the first time in twenty-two years that he had been inside a church. He tells us that he was richly rewarded and greatly surprised with what he found there. He decided to continue with his effort of attending church. And five years later, in the following words, he gave a report of his spiritual quest:

"I am for the churches because they have something for me and for civilization. Let God be thanked that there is on earth an institution that has a high opinion of man; an institution that transcends race, nation and class; an institution which is loyally undertaking to embody the spirit of Christ and in his name to relieve human suffering, promote human welfare and carry on a ministry of reconciliation among men."

Mr. Riis goes on to tell us that he found very difficult to answer that kind of program with such suggestions as, "I find it easier to worship in the woods alone", and "Sunday is my only day for loafing and for rest."

And so it is that the experience of Mr. Riis simply points up the great responsibility of the hearer in the program of the Kingdom of God. Many modern men give lip service to Christian ideals without recognizing the importance of attending the church. "Why bother about the church?" they say, "Can't a man be a good Christian without having to attend church?" And to such questions I answer "Yes - in about the same way that a man might be educated without ever attending school."

Jesus never touched upon this question of church going. I'm sure that he attended the services of the synagogue, but I'm also sure that our Lord never nagged or urged men to go to church. However, in the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, he did share his own experiences with those who listened to him. Even He did not win them all. He said it was like a sower scattering seeds. Some of the seeds fell on hard, packed earth, and did not take root. Other seeds fell on shallow ground. Some fell on soil that had weeds in it. But most of it fell on good ground where it brought forth good grain. In other words, the responsibility for Christian growth rests on the hearer, on the soil.... and not on the sower, or the preacher. We know that the finest seed can do nothing without the cooperation of the soil. And more than ever before, I'm convinced that the cause of Christianity depends on those who are not in the clergy, but whose dedications are as complete as if they had been ordained priest or pastor.

The four types of listeners referred to in the parable are found in every city and community in our land. Jesus would have us learn from this parable something about the value of church attendance. And as we come to understand the meaning behind this parable, we will avoid the pitfalls of careless listening by knowing just what we go to church for.....

FIRST: WE GO TO CHURCH TO KEEP
OUR HEARTS ALIVE AND SENSITIVE
TO THE SPIRIT OF GOD.

"Some seeds fell by the wayside,
and the birds came and devoured
them up".

This hard-packed ground, along the edge of the field and probably used as a path by the farmer, was the first kind of soil that did not produce. These pathways are in every field. They're useful in themselves, but they never produce anything. The seed fell on top of the ground, and pretty soon the birds came and devoured them up. The seeds did not take root.

And so it is that there are scores of people like that everywhere today. They're good people, and they're useful people, but they have no use for the church or for religion. Their minds are made up about everything. Their hearts have become hardened. Their spirits are indifferent to the spirit of God. Their lives are taken up with small wayside interests, with the result that they have little time left for the biggest things of all. Now these people occasionally come to church, perhaps out of a sense of duty or curiosity. They avoid the one thing that can help them the most. They need to have their horizons extended, and their souls lifted up into the presence of the divine. It is for this that we go to church. Hearts become hardened so easily. Our spirits die without the refreshment of divine worship.

I'm sure that some of you are familiar with a new development in the field of medical science. It's the perfection of a method to start human hearts beating once again after they have stopped during an operation. As soon as the heart stops beating, the surgeons open the chest, and gently massage the heart. At the same time, oxygen is forced into the lungs through a tube in the wind pipe. There are many amazing cases where the patient has been brought back to life after the heart has stopped beating for as long as five minutes. Dr. Claude Beck, one of the surgeons who assisted in developing this technique said this: "You can resuscitate any normal heart, if you do it right. You do it right by not thinking wrong. The heart wants to beat."

And so it is with the spiritual heart. It wants to breathe. It wants to beat. In fact, it has been made to beat in harmony with the heart of God. And yet so often it stops beating because of an overload of cares, worries, and thoughtless living. But spiritual hearts, as well as physical hearts, can be brought back to life. It is before the altars of God that we breathe the life giving oxygen of faith and find the red blood of divine power pulsating through the chambers of the soul. This operation is performed in the house of God. There's no substitute for public worship, and those who studiously avoid the church are simply starving their own souls. Soon they will be dead on their feet. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear".....let him hear in the house of God, the word of God that leads to a life that is rich and abundant!

SECOND: WE GO TO CHURCH
TO BUILD A STRONG FOUNDATION
FOR OUR FAITH.

"And others fell upon the rocky places
where they had not much earth; and
straight way they sprang up, because
they had no deepness of earth, and

when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root they withered away.

Many places in Palestine were like that. The soil was just a thin layer of rock. The seed sprouted quickly, but the plant did not mature, because it had no root to feed it. It soon dried up.

I think that our Lord is trying to point out to us that there are many people like this in matters of religious faith. They're what you might term emotional, and unstable. They become quickly interested in every new fad or cult that comes along, and when the newness wears off, they take up something else. Or if the preacher says something they don't like, they quit the church. Or if people don't make enough of them, they become hurt. Under the spell of some emergency, they may turn to God for help, but when the crisis is over, they quickly forget God, and their faith dries up. When it's popular to be religious, they are the most popular people around. But in times of criticism, opposition, and social pressure, they surrender without a struggle.

These people remind me of Pliable in John Bunyan's Pilgrim Progress. Remember Pliable? He was the person that was easily attracted to the pilgrimage with Christian. He liked the idea of the cherubim and the seraphim, and the golden harps at the end of the journey. But when Pliable came to the Slough of Despond, he couldn't take it. He had to turn back when the going got rough.

There are many Pliables in the world today. They're on the fringe of every congregation. They're good people. They're not insincere. But they're just not deeply rooted in their faith. They need to put a foundation under the faith. They need to drop their anchor in some church. They need to live with their faith and learn what it can do for them. And such things come best of all, by regular attendance at church - week in and week out, year in and year out!

And so it is that in the church a person grows strong of mind by borrowing the might of God. Let me remind you that the church is no picayune endeavor. It needs men and women - strong, able, mature and dedicated - to carry it forward. It is here that a person finds that which makes life steadfast - sure - and serene! "He who hath ears to hear, let him hear!"

THIRD: WE GO TO CHURCH TO CLEANSE
OUR SPIRITS AND PURIFY OUR MOTIVES.

The third kind of soil referred to in the parable was that which was described as thorny. Jesus interprets this in the

following fashion:

"As for what was sown among thorns, this is he who hears the word, but in the cares of the world, and the delight in riches, chokes the word and it proves unfruitful."

I trust that all of you have seen thorny fields. The soil in such fields is mixed and dirty. Weeds grow in abundance, choking out the good seed. And the farmer has to choose between weeds or grain, for two crops cannot grow in the same soil.

Many church goers are like that, said Jesus. They have mixed motives. The soil of their soul is supporting more than one crop. They're divided in their loyalties. They're poor disciples because they have conflicting purposes. They may be attracted by the lure of gold rather than by the call of godliness. Their secondary interests choke out the good seed.

We desparately need something by which, thorny lives may be restored to their true nature. We find this saving element in the church of God. It is in church that we come face to face with the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ. It is here that our consciences are confronted by the divine conscience. As we worship God, our personalities become cleansed, our motives purified, the weeds pulled out, and godly goals set and followed.

All of this demands our complete allegiance. In Him, our lives are unified and made whole. We had better not come to church if we are afraid to face the spirit of Jesus Christ. Souls can be changed, and well as soils. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear."

WE GO TO CHURCH TO MAKE OUR LIVES COUNT FOR SOMETHING.

"And others fell upon good ground, and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty....."

Only a small part of the seed falls on hard, rocky and thorny ground. Most of it falls on the good soil and it brings forth fruit. However, the amount of the crop is not the same in every field. Not all fields are equally fertile and productive. Some results are greater than others.

And so it is in the church. We go to church to make our lives count for something. We go to church to make something bigger and better of our lives. Results come in most cases. To be sure, they're not always the same. Some people have more capacity for the gospel than others, but the results in any case are measurable.

On one occasion, the Russian composer Borodin was asked by his little daughter, Gania, if she might play a duet with him on the piano. He didn't even know that she knew how to play, and the request pleased him. They sat down together on the same piano stool. The little girl slowly and painfully picked out "chopsticks" with one finger of each hand. And while she pecked away, her talented father improvised an accompaniment. Later Borodin set the whole thing down in the "Coteletten Polka". His friend Rimsky-Korsakov added some variations, and later on Franz Lizst did the same. And still later this music was orchestrated for full orchestra and only recently recorded. Little Gania's efforts have been glorified and have contributed beauty to the world far beyond her original intent.

In a sense, this is what happens to us in church. We seek here to play a duet with God. We bring our small, weak talents, and they're glorified and multiplied and made useful by the Master himself. It is in church that our human chopsticks become part of the divine symphony. It is here that our stature is increased and our spirits marshalled for high and great purposes. Here is the seedbed from which spring a free nation, happy homes, a brotherly society, and deeds of love, sacrifice and service. It is not what we can do, but what God can do through us that really counts. We go to church to make our lives count for something. For we need to remember that there is no single way one person can do more for freedom and decency in our world today than by actively relating himself to the church of God. "He that hath ears to hear, let him hear!"

LET US PRAY: O Spirit of the Living God, Thou light and fire divine.
Descend upon thy Church once more, and make it truly thine.
Fill it with love and joy and power, with righteousness and
peace,
Till Christ shall dwell in human hearts, and sin and sorrow
cease.