



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"SHADOWS OF INFLUENCE"

Sunday Morning, July 16, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural reference: I Corinthians 8:1-13

The book of Acts is an intriguing study of life in the early Church. It manages to capture the broad sweep of events while at the same time preserving little details of human interest. An example of the latter is the reference to Peter's shadow in chapter five. It seems that he had gained such a reputation for healing that sick folk would line the street so that as he came by "at least his shadow would fall on some of them" (Acts 5:15).

Now at first sight this appears to be mere superstition - the idea of a man's shadow having remedial power. Yet on second thought it symbolizes a very real facet of human life; namely, the influence one exerts on his surroundings. Just as our bodies cast shadows on the ground, so our personalities affect the situation about them. I can think of no better parallel, and therefore in addressing myself to this subject I have purposely chosen the title "Shadows of Influence."

What I want to say falls into three parts. Each point is an obvious truth, and there is a logical progression from one to the other. The first point is this: we all exert an influence. To live is to touch others, and thus to yield some power over them. Many people try to evade this fact under the guise of mediocrity. They disclaim any importance and maintain they are so inconsequential that no one ever notices them. But this is a fanciful rationalization. Of course some people are more influential than others, but this variance of degree does not exclude anyone. The colloquialism is true: "Everybody influences somebody."

One December afternoon a worker in a flour mill stopped by the Post Office to mail his Christmas cards. The lobby was crowded with people, and as he went in and came out you could trace his path exactly because the flour had rubbed off his clothes and left a mark on everyone he touched. And so it is with personal influence. No matter how we may deprecate our importance, the fact remains that this is a universal possession - an inseparable part of human personality.

While we are considering this fact, it is well to note that the scope of influence exceeds our knowledge. There are times that the effects of influence are clearly seen. For example, not long ago I called to my wife from one room to another and used her given name. A few minutes later I was startled to hear my three-year-old son address his honorable mother as "Lue Ann." To live with these mimics called children is to see the effects of influence. But it does not stop there. Just as shadows sometimes fall in unknown places, so our influence permeates areas of which we are not aware. This is the awesome side of the matter. If we could limit our influence to "a controlled situation" it would be fine. But we cannot! There are unknown eyes watching at the most unsuspecting moments; we can never fully know the extent of our power.

Once a minister supplied the pulpit of a large downtown church and preached on personal honesty. The next day he boarded a bus, got change for a dollar, paid his fare, and found a seat in the back. As was his custom he counted the change, and discovered he had been given a nickel too much. The usual thoughts came to his mind - it was a small amount and a long way back to the front. But by virtue of a lifetime habit of integrity, he returned the surplus. When he did, the driver said: "I probably should not have done this, but you see, I heard your sermon yesterday, and when I saw you get on I decided to see if you practiced what you preached." As the minister returned to his seat, cold sweat came to his brow, for he realized he had been put to the test by an utter stranger without ever knowing it. Therefore the first point is an evident fact: this extension of personality we call influence is a universal possession, the scope of which we can never know.

The second statement moves one step further: influence is a potent force in life. I need not labor the point that we humans are so inter-related that the action of one affects the others. This has been recognized in every age. When the Bible likens men to sheep - "all we like sheep have gone astray," when the psychologist speaks of someone being "other directed"; when the sociologist talks of "conformity"; they each bear witness to the power of influence. What we do is of decisive significance for others. Just as bullets being fired from a gun, so impressions emanate from us that affect men's lives. Never underestimate the power of one person over another.

When I was in high school, one of my classmates was involved in a terrible traffic accident. It all started when a police car tried to stop him from speeding. The boy decided "to lose" the officer, and in making a fast turn crashed into another car, killing an elderly couple. When the boy's father got to the jail and learned the story, he asked his son why he had done such a thing. The boy gave an honest answer. He said: "Dad, three weeks ago as you took me to school the same thing happened. But you were slick enough to shake the cops. I tried it too, but failed." If you do not think influence makes a difference, ask that father. Yes, this is an extremely potent aspect of life - the effect we have on others.

The third point is something of a conclusion to the other two. If we have this extension of personality, and it is of decisive significance for others, then the matter of influence will become a real consideration for the Christian. This is part of what it means to "love our neighbor as ourselves." If the essence of becoming a Christian is shifting from love of self to love of others, then it follows naturally that the effect of our influence will be a foremost concern. It actually injects an additional factor into the process of ethical decision. The Christian will not only ask: "Is it right?" He must go further and say: "What effect will this have on others?"

The classic treatment of this subject is found in the eighth chapter of I Corinthians. Paul here is dealing with a problem in which influence is a decisive factor. The particular issue is remote from our time, but the principle Paul lays down has been definitive for Christian thought. The problem arose in relation to eating meat that had been offered to idols. Now Corinth was a citadel of paganism, and the offering of meat was a vital part of the local ritual. The pagan felt that such meat was infused by their gods, and to eat it was to grant them access to one's inner life. A person would encounter this type of meat on every hand; it might be a part of a private banquet, a part of a public celebration, or even on sale at a cheap price in the market. The question centered in how a Christian should regard such meat.

Paul fully understood the situation, and he began on the individual and intellectual plane. Since the Christians knew there was but one God, they rejected the idea of divine infusion. From the vantage point of their superior insight, no harm could come from sitting at a banquet or eating any type of food. If it had been solely a matter of individual concern, such meat would have made no difference.

But Paul does not stop there. He points to the recent convert who is still unsure of his Christian foundation. What about him? If he sees Christians at pagan banquets or observes them eating sacrifices, the radical distinction between the Christian and non-Christian may be blurred. He may be pulled back into the old associations and the former circle of thought and fall back into pagan ways. Such action by Christians could be a stumbling block; that is, it could cause another "to lose his footing." Paul puts too high a value on human personality for that to happen. He does not command; he simply states his own position: "If meat causes my brother to stumble, I will eat no meat" (I Corinthians 8:15).

Now it is important to note exactly who is the object of Paul's concern. He is thinking of the young Christian with "a weak conscience" who is honestly trying to find the way. Paul does not mean that we are to become enslaved to public opinion. We are not to become the prey of every narrow-minded legalist who wants to superimpose their negativism upon us. In the Galatian letter Paul demonstrated no patience with the "Judaizers" who actively tried to distort the Gospel. He is not referring here to those who openly advocate certain limitations; he has in mind the people who look to us for guidance. It is the pliable, impressionable, seeking young Christian that we are to think about.

In this case Paul gives love pre-eminence over liberty. He speaks of the brother as one "for whom Christ died," the point being that if Christ was willing to sacrifice this much, surely you could sacrifice one type of food. The argument rests on the very logic of love. If what happens to someone else really makes a difference to you, then the question of influence will take top priority. I would even go so far as to say it is a pretty good test of one's spiritual depth. If all this talk seems like an unnecessary complication; if you react against the difficulties that matters of influence raise, it may be a sign that you are not deeply committed to the logic of the Gospel. The serious Christian cannot evade so important a reality; his moral judgments will have to extend beyond himself. He cannot stop by determining if it is right for him; he must consider the possible effect on others.

The applications of this principle are endless. It is certainly relevant to the liquor question, especially in this country. You may say to me: "Why the Bible teaches that Jesus made wine. He Himself said that it is not what enters a man from without that defiles him, but what comes from within." And on a purely individual and intellectual basis, I would have to agree. But what about the social implications? One man's strength is another man's weakness. What if your example contributed to another man's spiritual downfall? Christ identifies Himself with that man. He says: "Whatsoever ye do to the least of these my brethren, ye do it unto Me." Love is more basic than liberty. Human personality is more precious than individual privilege. With the great background of alcoholism in this country, this is the line along which the Christian thought should move.

This principle is also applicable to our attitudes on the race problem. Missionary after missionary have come back and begged us to wake up to what we are doing. Some eighteen months ago I stood with a Wallace Duvall the night before he

was to return to Africa for his second term as a missionary. We had come to be close personal friends, and I asked him sincerely what I could do to help him most. He said: "John, we need your money and your prayers and your support. But the best thing you could do is help change the situation here in our homeland. If something doesn't change, my work there will be closed in a few years." The serious Christian cannot ignore such a plea. If racial discrimination is a hindrance to the world missionary task, then we must let it go for love's sake. If Little Rock and New Orleans and Montgomery are stumbling blocks for the great colored nations of the world, we must not let them happen again.

You could go on and on this morning with application, but the point should be clear. What I have said this morning is not new, but it is of strategic importance. Influence is an inseparable part of personality, just like a shadow. And it is as powerful as the bullet from any gun. Therefore, the Christian must take it seriously. The old song "Me and My Shadow" holds these two concerns together. I must ask "Is it right for me?"; but then I must also think of "my shadow." For the Christian, it is never enough to think of "me." It must always be "me and my shadow."