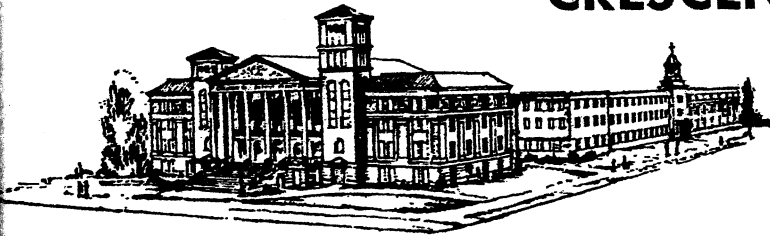


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"SPIRIT AND DISCIPLINE"



Sunday Morning, November 5, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Mark 14:3-9; 32-42

There are two incidents in the life of Christ which will serve as the basis of our thinking this morning. The first takes place in the village of Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem (Mark 14:3-9). Jesus was eating in the home of a man named Simon, and while He was reclining around the table a woman came in and anointed His head with a whole jar of expensive ointment. The identity of this person is not disclosed in Matthew or Mark. Luke speaks of her as "a great sinner" (Luke 7:37), and John indicates that she was Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus (John 11:2). However, we cannot be certain that the evangelists are referring to the same incident, and her identity is not crucial to the meaning of the passage. What is important is the spontaneous character of her act. She was grateful to this One, and with the extravagance and impulsiveness that is born of love, she proclaimed her adoration for Christ. And He was deeply moved by her act. He defended her against the criticisms of the insensitive materialists, and spoke of this as a beautiful deed that would be remembered as long as the Gospel was preached.

The second incident also took place on the outskirts of Jerusalem - in the garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-42). It was the last night of our Lord's earthly pilgrimage. The shadows of tragedy were already deepening, and with unerring discernment He noted the direction in which the swift current of events was flowing. In such an hour He turned to His ultimate resources - heavenly fellowship and human companionship. He went to pray, and asked His three closest friends - Peter, John, and James - to share this experience with Him. So they went out together, but the disciples did not comply with His requests. They were physically exhausted from the excitement of the day, and Jesus asked them to do something that was contrary to the inclination of the moment. He said: "Watch and pray," when they felt like going to sleep. Three times He begged them to persevere with Him, but they would not. So in His greatest moment of need, He was bereft of human companionship.

These are the two incidents, and perhaps you are wondering about their relation to each other. On the surface they appear quite distinct; they are neither consecutive in time nor similar in nature. However, I see in them a paradoxical unity. They illustrate the two prerequisites of spiritual experience. Here are the two boundary lines between which the Christian life moves; these are the sides of the channel through which our religion flows. Just as an eclipse revolves around two foci, so Christian experience revolves around these two realities. One is spontaneity, that unblocked impulse that responds directly to a situation; the other is discipline, that steady resolve which is deeper than feeling or the inclination of the moment. Jesus commends both of these facets, and when you put them together, you have a pattern that is basic for all of life. This is in keeping with the finest insights of psychology and philosophy. When Alfred North Whitehead writes

Sunday Morning, November 5, 1961

that all human activity oscillates between "understanding and routine," he is referring to the same principle that I find in these two experiences of Christ.

Here is a unity of counterparts. Spontaneity and discipline are distinct from each other, yet dependent on one another. When held together in living oneness, each nourishes and fulfills the other. Spontaneity gives meaning to discipline and discipline provides the foundation for spontaneity. By the same token, when they are sundered apart and one is emphasized to the exclusion of the other, an unbalanced distortion occurs. Spontaneity without discipline leads to unevenness and instability; discipline without spontaneity leads to purposeless, mechanical routine. Each requires the other to complete itself, and one cannot achieve spiritual maturity without giving due allowance to both. Here is the loving impulse of the woman; here is the demand of Christ for discipline; together they constitute the pattern for Christian experience.

Now this principle is so basic you will encounter it no matter where you turn in the realm of spiritual experience. It is certainly operative in the practice of prayer. Here there is a definite need for immediate meaning. One must feel that he is talking to "Someone who is really there"; he must sense that this is authentic communication; he needs the assurance of "a real Presence," that his words are not a soliloquy or sounds rising no higher than the ceiling. For prayer to have any significance at all, there must be moments when a person is "overshadowed from beyond," when he becomes suddenly aware that he is not alone on his knees. Such moving sensations are absolutely indispensable, but they are not the whole story of prayer. If one stops here, his prayer life becomes an "existential zigzag." There is no developing of capacity, or stretching the horizon of one's ability. To pray only when one "feels like it" is to stay on the same monotonous level. You repeat the same words in the same way, and because there is no growth there is no life. The capacity to pray, like any other natural gift, must be developed through practice. And just as no one becomes an accomplished musician by playing only when "the mood strikes them," so no one learns to pray who limits his activity to instinctive cries in times of crisis. C. S. Lewis is exactly right in saying that the most crucial aspect of prayer is not what you do when you feel like praying, it is what you do when you do not feel so inclined. In this area our principle is fundamental; there must be moments of spontaneous meaning, but there must also be an established "practice of His presence."

If you turn to the subject of public worship, you will again be confronted by these two fixed poles. In every service I am mindful of the need for spontaneous significance. I try to structure an order of service and prepare a sermon that will be relevant to human need. I want people to come and under the leadership of this service to receive something of eternal value. I want them to walk out those doors renewed and revitalized by what they have experienced. This is my goal each Sunday, but I know it is not always realized. Some days, perhaps because of me or because of you, things do not "click." You are not laid hold of from beyond; you heard no word from above; the sermon "leaves you cold," and you go home just like you came, probably a little weary of it all. Does that mean you should quit church altogether? Quite to the contrary! Here is the need for discipline. Human variance being what it is, some services will mean more than others. But usually you cannot anticipate this. If you limit your attendance to immediate sensation, you will go less and less and thus miss the opportunity of life-giving encounter. The discipline of regular worship puts you in the range of spiritual possibility. You are present for reasons deeper than momentary feelings, and thus are open to be "surprised by joy."

Sunday Morning, November 5, 1961

I shall never forget one of my most decisive worship experiences. I was in Madisonville, Kentucky, in the summer of 1950. I was selling books from door to door, and had with me a group of college boys for whom I was responsible. The first week was a rugged experience. The territory was new, and no one was doing too well. Some of the boys were not even making expenses, and they were quite distressed. I remember when I woke up that first Sunday I felt like anything but going to a strange church. I said to myself: "I'll just take it easy and rest up today." But a long habit of church attendance had been ingrained in me. As the morning moved on I changed my mind and went. And during the organ prelude before the service, I suddenly realized that God's care extended even into West Kentucky; that He who had provided all of life would help me find a way. This is a cliché that is quite overused, but my burden was literally "lifted" in that moment and my whole outlook changed. But you see, this would never have happened if I had acted according to feeling. Through the discipline of worship, the spontaneous significance was made possible. Again, both realities are required for fulfillment.

What we have seen to be true in prayer and worship is also applicable to the area about which our church is so concerned today - the area of material giving. Now the New Testament is full of references to spontaneous generosity. Jesus warned against a calculated, showy kind of giving, and suggested that one not let the left hand know what the right hand was doing (Matthew 6:3). He was often "moved by the moment," and bestowed His healing power in immediate response to human need. He pictured His followers as those whose love flowed out instinctively to others in distress. "I was hungry, and ye gave me to eat, thirsty and ye gave me drink..." (Matthew 25:31-46). When Zaccheus was redeemed by Christ, his first impulse was to restore four-fold all that he had taken (Luke 19:8). And in the most famous parable of all, Jesus contrasts the spontaneous action of the good Samaritan with the prudent indifference of the priest and Levi (Luke 10:29-37). There is no doubt about the place of spontaneity in New Testament stewardship. Love knows a reckless extravagance that pours forth from an unselfish heart. To see a need and instantly respond, even at great cost to one's self, - this is authentic Christianity.

But the same New Testament also admonishes: "On the first day of the week, let each one of you lay by him in store as God has prospered him" (I Corinthians 16:2). Here is the disciplined stewardship that must counterbalance emotional giving. The pattern which has already become so familiar is obvious here. Spontaneous giving is spotty and erratic. You respond to a particular need and then it may be months before anything else strikes your fancy. Quite often such giving deludes one into thinking he is very generous when a closer check reveals that he is giving only a pittance. I had a good friend who was such an emotional type and scorned any form of legalism. I dared him "to keep books" on himself, not for legalistic purposes, but for self-understanding. He took the dare, and after a while confessed real amazement at how little he was really giving away. And this experience is healthy for any person. If you follow no definite pattern of giving, but only respond to the moment, you may be completely deluded about how generous you are. We are familiar with the words of the old song: "Count your blessing, name them one by one, and it will surprise you what the Lord has done." I would say that the spontaneous giver will have the opposite reaction; if he takes the trouble to count his gifts one by one, it will surprise him how little he has done. There is a need for discipline, and to me this is the function of tithing. It is a safeguard against erratic emotionalism. It is a fair proportion, and prompts one to give in relation to a standard of values rather than momentary feelings. One needs to tithe for the same spiritual reason that he needs to pray regularly and attend worship services faith-

Sunday Morning, November 5, 1961

fully. The Old Testament combination of "tithes and offerings" is the proper unity of spontaneity and discipline.

We could go on and on in application, but I hope by now the principle is clear. Just as inhaling and exhaling are the rhythmic counterparts of physical life, so spontaneity and discipline are the counterparts of the life of the soul. They form a unity that must be maintained, a reality that must never be sundered. You need understanding, but it must be wedded with routine. There must be flashes of impulse and insight, but they must be rooted in settled habit. These must be held together if spiritual maturity is attained. Like the popular song "Love and Marriage," these two go together like "a horse and carriage." And the warning of that song is relevant as well: "You can't have one without the other." Here are spontaneity and discipline; make them a united foundation! For it is true, brother, "you should not have one without the other!"