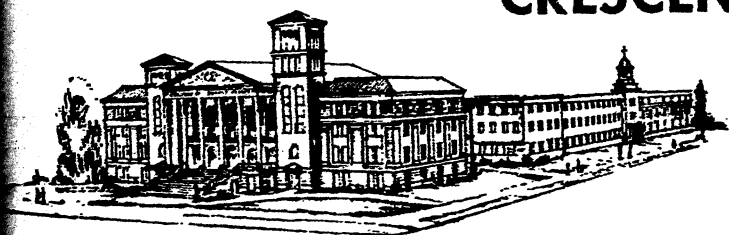


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"SPIRITUAL PORTRAITS"



Sunday Morning, February 11, 1962
Grescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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It is amazing how much can be conveyed in a few words. Saint Paul was the master of this. At times he could launch into a wordy theological discourse; at other times he made little personal asides that spoke volumes. This morning, our sermon is based on such a scant reference. In the closing verses of II Timothy, Paul paints a thumb-nail sketch of three of his associates. Only a few words are employed, but the insight and the contrast is significant. Look with me, if you will, at these spiritual portraits from the gallery of an old prisoner's acquaintance.

The first subject is a man by the name of Demas. He is mentioned only two other times in the New Testament (Philemon 24, Colossians 4:14), and is designated as "a fellow worker." Now it seems that he has turned his back on Paul and returned to Thessalonica (his home?) because he "loved this present world" (II Timothy 4:10). Here is the old, old story of one not finishing what he had begun. Harry Emerson Fosdick once preached a great sermon on this man and entitled it: "The Power To See It Through." This is what Demas lacked, and to the great sorrow of the aged apostle, he proved a deserter in a time of need.

We are given no light as to exactly what happened. It could have been that Demas did not fully understand the Christian way from the very beginning. He could have been swept in under the warm glow of emotion, and not have realized the costly demands involved. There is a type of evangelism that emphasizes only what Christianity has to offer. It dwells on peace and joy and happiness, which are real products of the faith. But it ignores the other side; namely, that these realities come when one commits himself to a different set of values. The Christian lives on another frequency from the non-Christian, and it is sometimes painful to stand for Christian right against the accepted convention. I would have to say personally that my Christian commitment is the occasion of both my greatest joys and my greatest difficulties. There are costly demands made of me because I am a Christian that I would otherwise ignore. Thus, our religion meets us paradoxically; there is both "give and take," and authentic Christian evangelism presents the whole case. This is precisely why we are working with New Member Classes here at Crescent Hill. It would be easier just to let things go, but a misunderstanding at first can be fatal in later Christian experience. Demas may not have been apprised of all the facts in the beginning, and thus when hardship came he turned back because it was more than he had bargained for.

Again, his desertion could have been the weariness of passing years. Age has a tendency to diminish ideals; what is a passionate concern in youth loses its cutting edge in later years. Demas may have grown tired of the difficulties and hardships. The old values that once had been worth living and dying for began to fade, and

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quietly he slipped into the security and ease of conformity. Certainly the passing years need not do this to us, but they can. I remember talking to an older minister once about our present racial struggle. At first he was quite critical of the Negro and all attempts that were being made. Then, abruptly he stopped and said: "But that's not really it. The truth is I am too old to begin such a big fight. I realize that the cause is just, and if I were young like you I'd be in the thick of it. But I am just too old." And perhaps this is what happened to Demas.

We can never be sure of why it took place, but this much we know: his loyalties shifted, one fire went out and another started; certain values emerged as the controlling ultimates of his life. He was no vicious, sin-crazed individual. According to Paul, in the final analysis he loved this present world more than Christ's appearing. The concerns of time and space, yea the concern for self, ultimately proved supreme. He forsook Christ in his love for the world, just as Paul had forsaken the world in his love for Christ. And Demas should be a living warning to each of us. If it could happen to him, it could happen to you. Jesus spoke of the plant that began to grow and then was choked out "by the cares of the world" (Mark 4:19). He also warned against putting one's hand to the plow and looking back (Luke 9:62). However you structure your concept of "the security of the believer," you must reckon with the inexorable New Testament assertion: "He that endureth to the end shall be saved" (Mark 13:13). With the experience of Demas before our eyes, "let anyone who thinketh that he stands, take heed lest he fall" (I Corinthians 10:12).

The second portrait is Luke. By all odds here is one of the loveliest New Testament characters. He was a Greek, a physician, a companion of Paul for many years. He seems to have joined the apostle in Tarsus on his second journey, and some feel that he was responsible for Paul's turning to Europe instead of going east to Bithynia. It is at least possible that Luke came from his native Macedonia and begged Paul to come to them. And as the apostle wrestled with the decision, the image of Luke - "a man of Macedonia" (Acts 16:9) - kept appearing, until he finally understood it as the will of God. It is Luke that compiled the magnificent document "Luke - Acts," and who ministered tenderly to the great Paul through all his trials. In this verse Luke appears to be his only companion, and this symbolized Luke's utter faithfulness. How was Luke able to accompany a Roman prisoner on his journey to trial? Certainly no mere friend would be allowed to go along. But a citizen was permitted two slaves, and it could be that Luke accepted this role in order to stay with Paul. Think of it - an esteemed physician with status of his own - willing to be known as a slave to accompany a friend. In the vernacular of our day, Luke was "one of the great ones," a Christian man above reproach in every way. His loyalties ran deep; once committed he never thought of turning back.

And it is well for us to consider the splendid character of such faithfulness. In our era of "personality cults," when even in religion we tend to glorify the spectacular and the colorful individual, let it be known that there is no finer virtue than simple, lasting faithfulness and loyalty. A little one hundred and ten volt electrical outlet can do more good than several bolts of lightning, and so is personal consistency in contrast to extraordinary capacity. I heard once of a revival where the evangelist asked everyone to go and stand by the person who had meant most to him spiritually. As people began to move, there were several individuals around whom large groups were expected. There was a lawyer who had taught a big Sunday School class and been a fiery prophet of righteousness; there were two former pastors present, both greatly beloved; the present pastor; and many other

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outstanding church leaders. But to everyone's surprise the biggest group was not around any of these, but around an old widow whom no one remembered ever saying anything in church. She made her living washing clothes, and made her spiritual impact by simple day by day faithfulness. This is still the Church's most potent weapon - Christians who are something before they do something. And Luke is the patron saint of the faithful.

The last portrait is of John Mark. He had a wonderful Christian heritage. His mother, Mary, owned some property in Jerusalem, and her home seemed to be the meeting place of the early church. When Mark grew older and the missionary movement began, he was selected to accompany Paul and Barnabas. He had a great future ahead of him, but then something went wrong. When the party got inland to Perga and "the going got rough," John broke away and came home (Acts 13:13). Paul took this desertion very seriously, and later as they prepared for a second journey he refused to have Mark on the staff. The disagreement over it became so acute that he and Barnabas split up, Paul taking Silas and Barnabas, Mark. Now years had passed, and Paul is saying: "Bring Mark with you" (II Timothy 4:11). He, for whom Paul once had no use, was now useful to him. Mark was the restored runaway; the quitter had been reclaimed, and had developed into a dependable minister.

As such, Mark symbolizes the very glory of the Christian Gospel. Men can be changed; they do not always have to be what they are. This hopeful possibility is the grandest message of life, and is the essence of Christian proclamation. Someone has characterized the Christian movement as "the success of failures," the story of men who have become what they were not - by the grace of God. Mark, the useless, now Mark the useful is a parable of the Christian faith.

How did this transformation take place? We cannot be exactly sure. Was it Paul's brutal harshness that forced Mark to face up to his weakness? This certainly is one side of "the forgiving process" that cannot be ignored. Men must take their failures seriously before they can be overcome. This could have been the decisive factor, but I have another opinion. I believe it was the influence of Barnabas. Here was one who took things seriously, but he was also willing to work through a problem. Instead of rejecting the wrongdoer, Barnabas went to his side and offered to help. I imagine he approached Mark like this: "Friend, what you did over there in Perga was a terrible thing; there is no getting around that. But Mark, I can't believe that was a measure of the real you. There is more to you than that; I can't accept that act as the last word. I believe you can be different. Come with me; let's try it again." Such hopeful faith strikes deep into the heart, much deeper than condemnation. When Paul could not be persuaded, Barnabas was so convinced in Mark's worth that he sacrificed his place with Paul to see it through. And as he patiently rebuilt a wrecked life, and kept pointing toward the future and the great possibilities, I believe he was the redemptive agent. A love like his, that "bears all things," this is what never fails and makes successes of failures. Would to God we had more men like Barnabas among us! Those that Paul writes off as hopeless, he stands by patiently. And as the years go by these very ones reenter the circle of usefulness. Yes, I believe the action of Barnabas was the transforming link. He did for Mark what he once did for Paul when he was a converted persecutor - he affirmed faith in him and expressed hope for him.

These are the portraits which hang in the gallery of an old apostle's associates. We can learn from each one. Demas is a warning, Luke is an example; and John Mark - he is the hope that keeps us going.