

DOUBTS LEAD TO IDOLS

Little wonder that when one exercises his doubts long enough he soon will turn to idols instead of God. Such was the case with the Israelites. A golden calf was far more tangible to them than some elusive spirit, so they cast the image, danced around it in the pagan security of nearness. But why should we be so hard on those early people when the same sin is everywhere among us today.

The idols of our own casting are legion in number . . . idols depicted in the life of a young man who, while walking down the road, found a \$2 bill. From then on he was always walking with his head down in search of another. In forty years he found 29,000 buttons, 54,000 pins, 17 pennies, a bent back and a miserly disposition. He lost the glow of the sunlight, smiles

on the faces of friends, the songs of the birds, beauties of the flowers, and the radiance of the skies. And all because his head was down!

No exaggeration at all . . . for the direction one looks can become his god . . . the nature of his search, the desire of his soul.

Oh, let us look up this day and cut a clean swath through this jungle undergrowth of doubts and cynical questions about God. Then go straight through this tepid, malarial swamp where life is threatened by a thousand hazards. The sunlight of serene living is in Canaan where God's people should have gone a long time ago. Whatever the nature of your wilderness, be it financial, physical, emotional, mental . . . whatever it may be, God is all-sufficient. Trust Him now to lead you out.

THE PAIN OF SELF-DENIAL

August 24, 1958

Scripture: Luke 9:23-26

To speak of the pain of self-denial in a day which would rather hear one speak of self-expression is to draw the fire of millions. The art of denying ourselves, even elemental pleasures, is nearly unknown. In His forthright statement about being a disciple, Jesus said, "If any man would come after me let him deny himself . . ."

Quite well He knew that if there is no self-denial, there would not follow any cross-bearing and steady following Him in service. Most of today's psychology is aimed at self's assertion, bringing oneself out, realizing the maximum expression, translating desire into reality. Restraint, renunciation, denial seem to speak of a by-gone era when men were afraid to face the facts of life.

DENYING DIET

Historically self-denial has been thought of as doing without certain food on specified days. While it takes a degree of self-discipline to push back from the table, this is hardly what Jesus referred to in His

directive. If one denies himself of a new suit of clothes or a trip to the beach and gives the money to some deserving cause, is this not fulfilling what Jesus said? Hardly. There is no doubt but what such foregoing of new clothes in order that others might at least have some kind of clothes is commendable charity, but the question keeps rising, what does Jesus mean by denying oneself?

Just this: let one make of himself a stranger to himself. In no other attitude can one become the true servant of God. Such does not mean a scathing, ascetic, negative attitude toward one's self as though the death impulse had taken over. Not that at all. One can refrain from meat . . . all kinds of meat, as a matter of fact he can be a complete vegetarian and still be a stranger to God.

The holy man can trample live coals to prove his devotion to his religion but such hardly qualifies the spirit within. Every type of bodily rigor can be endured in the name of religion without remotely approaching this statement of Jesus that if any man would be His

disciple he must first deny himself. The word to note is *self*.

THE WHOLE SELF

Not deny his back necessarily, nor for that matter, his stomach, but himself. That is, his inner ego that cries out for expression, demanding rights, wanting to play the role of his own god, to take the initiative despite the consequences. It is the undying, proud inner self that conflicts with God and His purposes for the human soul. It is not uncommon to find a devoutly pious individual whose perfection of religious fasting is admirable indeed, but beneath which there is an unregenerate ego in constant turmoil and conflict with God's sovereignty.

Once this aggravatingly hard lesson is learned, life takes on a strangely beautiful glow. Once self is decentralized and God is enthroned, then life's momentum steps up its pace. Direction is enhanced in ratio to perspective and one never has that old, "what am I supposed to be doing" feeling. While he may not be too happy about his speed, he never questions the fact of his direction. And all because he has enthroned God and dethroned self.

As an early President of the United States lay at death's door, the doctors advised that he be taken out in the country away from the noise of the city. To reach the country estate it was necessary to cut a temporary road across a portion of another farmer's front yard. But the farmer protested, "Your road will cut right through my rose garden." "Yes, that we regret, but it is all to try to save the life of the President." "The President?" the farmer answered, "Well, in that case, you can cut the road right through the middle of my house if needs be."

Sometimes God's will would cut right through the middle of some of our most cherished plans. We rebel, resent, protest, then when we see the real purpose, and yield the right of way, life's fractions begin to add up.

FACT OF THE PAIN

But let us not be fooled, this is a painful process. Self is not easily overlooked or discouraged; the ego when ignored, some-

times cowers, sulks, pities itself, and comes back fighting with injury fury. When I think of the great battles of the world: Argonne, Suribachi, Thermopylae, Waterloo, Tours . . . these and many others, I think of the agonizing groans that accompanied a whole symphony of pain, pain that was excruciating, torturing, incessant. Yet, much of that pain was mostly physical often producing quick death.

But the pain of slow conquest within man's soul knows no end if he would shape a soul in the likeness of the Nazarene. And where does the pain come in? Isn't this a day of moral easiness where we are taught to take religion with a grain of salt? Isn't the positive approach the way of self-realization? Unfortunately, such is the reasoning of the multitudes. But the way of the cross still is the only way that leads home, the gate is still strait and the path still narrow and few there be that find it.

It is the endless purging of our sinful selves that gives rise to the desire to continue the process. With all the deposits of sloth, ease and contentment in man's soul little wonder this kind of talk leaves him cold and flat. How else can God be seated on the throne of our hearts if we do not vacate the throne of ourselves?

MOTIVE FOR SELF-DENIAL

Then we are led to ask, "Why go through all this painful rigor?" What should motivate our doing so? Certainly not to merely flex our moral muscles. If one does without certain privileges, he merely will be in position to boast of his self-control. This was the sin of the Pharisee who prayed in the Temple. His thanks to God, that he wasn't as other sinners, made him the biggest sinner of them all. For no sin is worse than the failure to admit sin.

An Oriental legend says that a man had a habit of awakening every morning at six o'clock to say his prayers. One morning as he overslept, the devil woke the man up and said, "You're late for your prayers."

"But isn't it a bit odd that you, the devil, would wake a man up to pray to his God?"

The devil answered, "Not exactly, I'd rather have you awakened even by the devil to say your prayers because if I permit you to sleep then when you do awake, you'll feel penitent about the fact that you didn't get up to pray. Then you will look up and confess. But if I wake you up promptly every morning, you can pray every day for twenty years and feel a noble pride about it. That's why I nudged you this morning."

Why deny ourselves? But for one

simple reason: that Christ may dwell within us as Lord and Master. This is cause enough. Were there any other way for this to be accomplished, He would have told us.

That is why the apostle Paul exhorts, "do all for the glory of God." When we get to that place where most of our thinking is about someone else and about self only occasionally, we are approaching that blessed realizing of what it means to deny ourselves.

WHAT DID HE LEAVE?

August 31, 1958

Scripture Acts 16:25-31

On the occasion of a very wealthy man's funeral some one standing near the freshly closed grave asked, "How much wealth did he leave?" Without a studied effort to answer the man nearby answered, "Why, he left it all." Of course he did despite the miserly efforts in life to take it with him.

We always leave all of it . . . be it little or much. Some time later I preached the funeral of a fine, Christian gentleman who died in his mid-fifties and the question of that previous funeral came to my mind, "How much did he leave?" I asked that question of the Christian I had just buried . . . what did he leave?

In terms of cash, real estate, stocks and bonds, he didn't leave very much because, like most of us, he raised a big family, entertained a holy curiosity to know and do, responded to the outreached, empty hands and was known for his impulsive generosity. In terms of this world's wealth he didn't leave much. But he left another type of legacy . . . the real riches about which I want to tell you now.

WORTH SINGING ABOUT

For one thing he left the impression that Christian religion was worth singing about. For years he belonged to the choir and with few exceptions was in his accustomed seat not only for rehearsals but for nearly every worship service. The music he made was not confined to quartettes for his life was a type of aria.

Not that he wasn't human, he had his grumbling moments like any other Christian has, but in the main his life was like a melody. The impression one got was that Christianity is pre-eminently and primarily a matter of harmony and not discord.

The world has more that a giant share of discord of its own: poverty, ignorance, filth, contradictions . . . miseries untold. And for professing Christians to add their collection of wailings is to compound a pile that already is sickeningly high is too much.

JOY IN SALVATION

Today the lost note in Christendom . . . the note that desperately needs rescuing is the joy note in salvation. Like an elevating catalyst, life is lifted not by tears by smiles, not by the mournful wails of all that is wrong, but by the triumphant faith of those who know that some things still are right in life. That is something to sing about or whistle about or shout about. The faith of which Jesus spoke is akin to dynamite, its explosive qualities can't be exaggerated. When one has this kind, he can make music.

Thumb through the pages of any old hymn book and discover the number of favorite songs written by people who had no obvious reason for making music. Fannie Crosby, while being totally blind, cultivated a type of vision that shames most of us who have 20-20 sight. Here in one woman is more seeing than a million pagans who blissfully grope through life