

1970

Sermon Subject: "EXCUSES PLUG THE KEYHOLES OF CLOSED DOORS"

Try this. Face a mirror. Look yourself in the eye and say, "I have to live with myself and so I want to be fit for myself to know." As Shakespeare expressed it: "Above all--to thine own self be true". We need more than any other quality of life, the ability to face truth and to respond to that truth. The president of a prominent university made the observation, "In the years of my relationship to a college, I have come to believe that the B.A. degree is misnamed, instead of Bachelor of Arts, it ought to be builder of alibis." And then he noted that of the students who had passed through his college, few had been above finding alibis for mediocre scholarship. Usually it was a professor that didn't understand. It was a mental block that kept him ~~fully~~ from entering fully into that subject. Partisanship on the part of the professor for ~~x~~ certain students for one reason or another there was an alibi for not having persevered in quality work. If this were restricted to the college campus, what a tremendous thing it would be, but if it exists there it's only the beginning for the builder of alibis is a degree that man constantly confers upon himself. We restrict ourselves from growing in many areas by formulating reasons and excuses from entering into them. In that broad expanse of life that reaches out from where you stand at this moment to the ideals the goals for which you are reaching there are many closed doors. God has given you the key to open each. But excuses plug the keyholes of closed doors.

The mind is a tremendous thing. It's inconceivable that an organ can carry on the functions that the human mind performs. Yet we have great influence upon what our mind does, what it becomes. We manipulate it and ~~ak~~ keep it from carrying out its normal and appointed functions. ~~that the human mind~~ We have areas of natural influence that we impose upon a natural mind and orderly brain to twist it to fit our own pattern rather than what it ought to be. The whole field of psychology is identified with this one aspect of human behavior. The manipulation of a mind. The perversion of that which is ordinary into what we suppose it ought to be or what we want it to be. I saw a program on television the other day. A young man who was a victim of amnesia. He didn't know who he was. Knew nothing of his past. He was guided to a psychiatrist who, in meeting him for the first time supposed that there was something in the young man's life that he wanted to forget. Some fact that he didn't want to live with and in an attempt to escape that fact, he had shut out all memory of his past in order to escape that one thing. There are many ways in which we seek to escape, to avoid confrontation and they are the exercises of life that are common to everyone of us. One of these is projection. Lifting out of ourselves that which is undesirable or unworthy. Discovering in someone else those same factors, identifying them while ignoring our own. What a spiritual catharsis that is, to escape ~~our own thoughts~~ identification of our own faults becoming repentant of it, simply by discovering those same faults in someone else, castigating them. Criticizing them in order to keep from having to face up to our own. Or as one character in Shakespeare's play said, "Me thinks he doth protest too much." When we play upon the particular weakness of another person, you can be sure that weakness exists in great proportion in our own life. The fault that is the hardest to forgive in another person is the fault that we bear in our own lives. There's a classic example of projection in the Old Testament. David ~~x~~ was one of the greatest characters identified in the old Testament. He was showered with God's love and grace, a great thing. He was a man with feet of clay. He was constantly breaking down becoming mortal when he ought to be a stronger spiritual character. One of

these times was when he spied Bathsheba. A beautiful woman and to David having almost everything that he wanted. He began to covet Bathsheba, but he knew she belonged to another. Now he was spiritually sensitive that he wouldn't take another man's wife, so, he discovered her husband Uriah, a soldier in his army. He gave direct orders that Uriah be placed in the front ranks in a particularly dangerous encounter and then he sat back and waited to be sent word that Uriah had been killed in Battle. When word came, being the King, sensitive that he was, carried his condolences to Bathsheba and then proceeded to fill the void left by Uriah. David felt at peace with himself. Then Nathan the prophet came and said, "I have a problem that I want you to hear and give me your decision." David said, "Speak". Nathan said, "There was a farmer who had a great herd of livestock, he was expecting guests. Knowing that he would have to slay one of his animals to feed his guests, went out and looked over the flocks, but seeing all were desirable, he was loathe to give up any one of them. So he looked over into the barnyard of his neighbor, and saw a single lamb. And so he instructed his servants to bring that lamb. And he slew it and served it to his guests. David immediately saw the injustice of this and he rose to his feet, his face red with anger and he cried out, "That man deserves the penalty of death." Before he had regained his composure, Nathan leveled his finger into the face of David, "You are that man." How easily we can identify the ills of others while unwilling to discover those weaknesses in our own lives. So has Jesus expressed this truth often times we prick at the mote that is in the eye of our brother, ignoring the log that is in our own. And so we escape responsibility by projection.

And then we escape responsibility by evasion. Last week I watched the Cleveland Browns in their workout here in Gatlinburg. I kept my eye on the quarterback. He was a tremendous player. All the players rushed him. ^{because he held the ball} But he evaded them quickly side stepping moving agilely among all of the players evading encounter until he could get rid of the ball and move down field. It was a beautiful thing. The quality of greatness and of composure ~~is~~ is ability to evade the players on the field whether he's passing or running. But that characteristic ~~on the field~~ which is brilliant on the football field is cowardice in life. An evasion of an encounter. An evasion of responsibilities when we know there are responsibilities to be met. An evasion of demands that we know are constantly in readiness for us to meet. We evade them intellectually. We evade them by projecting ideas that will enable us to by-pass responsibilities that normally we would have to face up to. An evasion of our responsibility to the Church to which we belong. In recent years the National Council of Churches has had a bad image in most Churches. Over the past few years there have been a lot of people who had contributed liberally to their churches suddenly made the statement, "I do not approve of what the National Council of Churches is doing" so I am going to withhold my offering to that church." It became such a problem in our ~~Church~~ Conference here that it was passed as action of the annual Conference that any Church wishing to withhold its giving to National Council of Churches was permitted to do so. I'm not going to defend nor censure the National Council of Churches simply to point out that a person can withhold his gift to the Church when only a minor portion of that gift goes to a cause in which he does not believe, he denies the work that the rest of his gift will perform in other areas where he has some concern. Or the age old excuse, "I don't go to Church because there are hypocrites in the Church." Of course there are, but there are

far more outside the church. I know no place where we can go to avoid hypocrites in any fashion so why should we single out the Church as the one place not to go, because of hypocrisy. So we evade responsibility by finding ways that will justify those evasions. ~~There we escape responsibility by rationalization. We can~~
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Then we escape responsibility by rationalization. We can twist facts to meet our own needs. To satisfy our own desires. Remember when Jesus was visiting in a family of his friends just prior to his crucifixion. It must have been a very tender and meaningful moment for him. Everyone sensed it perhaps and one of the women of the house came in with a vial of perfume and anointed him with it. Wiping his feet with her hair. One of those in the companion of Jesus censured her for what she had done. Said to Christ, "Tell her she's done the wrong thing, she's wasted a costly ointment that could have been sold and the money taken and used to aid the poor but now she's wasted it, censure her for what she's done." The man who spoke those words was Judas. Obviously there was a greed that identified the cost of that ointment as something he would have chosen to be used to satisfy his own desires, not to honor one whose life afforded such rare opportunity to be honored. We rationalize, find ways in which to find substitutes for the real thing and ~~x~~ be satisfied. No prick conscience. At peace with ourselves.

Well, let's don't talk in general terms, let's be specific. We rationalize by believing that we can think evil and do good. And we have committed no offense. We guard our actions closely because we covet the good will of our neighbors, we don't want our friends to censure us. We don't want to be exposed as having any qualities that are undesirable so we jealously guard our actions. But what we do in the quiet moments, when we are apart from those who police our actions what then. There is the true self. It is that region ^{not} of encounter that takes place in the mind that identifies the true person and what one sees him doing. It distresses me that today there is so much salacious literature for young growing minds to feast upon. It doesn't bother me so much a mature mind that's set its pattern if sophisticated literature is appealing to such a mind, I'm not going to argue but for young minds that are grasping viewpoints and developing concepts to expose them to base literature, unsound principles, brutality and sexuality in such base forms. All of this creates a climate within the mind that is unhealthy and we cannot ~~keep~~ feast within the mind upon based and unworthy things and live a life that is worthy and wholesome. Wasn't it Jesus who said, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." We cannot think evil and do good. We often escape through rationalization by saying, "Mine is a unique case." I don't suppose any defendant in any courtroom thinking that his case defied the rules that in my instance it's different. We all feel that about our actions, our attitudes about life. What we consider to be wrong for other people, we consider to be right for ourselves because, 'my case is different and if you understood all the facts then you would see that I was justified and not to be censured in what I did." In the Scarlet Letter a young man and young woman come together. They had been indiscreet ~~with~~ in their relationship with one another and an illegitimate child was about to be born. They're discussing their plight. She says, "But we were justified in what we did, because our love is different." And he stricken with the pangs of conscience for what he had done, cried out, "Don't say that we are not different, we have done

something wrong, let's face it." That's a rare quality in a person, to be able to realize, my case is not unique, that I'm not different, but that the rules are the same. Here is a problem of situational ethics that has become so much a part of the theology of our day. Though there's a great realm of truth in situational ethics it can become an excuse for making oneself exclusive, apart from others. And then we say, so long as I keep the Ten Commandments, I can ignore the Beatitudes. How many people have evaluated Christian living on the value of keeping the Ten Commandments. The easiest part of being a Christian, I dare say there's not one in our group this morning who will ever be guilty of melting down his golden jewelry and fashioning out of it a golden calf before which he will kneel and worship. Few of any of us will ever bow down to a graven idol. Most of us in degrees, honor our Fathers and our mothers. And perhaps no one of us will ever commit murder. These are the commandments of negative living the things we do not do but the real problem of living, the real challenge for meaningful living, ~~comes~~ Christian living comes in the Beatitudes, where we move out of the negative realm into the positive realm. Not what we do not do but what we do. Remember when the young man came to Jesus and said, "Master, what must I do to be saved to follow you?" He said, "Keep the commandments." And the young man answered, "I have done that, I have kept them from my youth up." And then Jesus said, "One thing you lack. Go sell everything you have give it to the poor and then come follow me." The young man who was able to keep all the laws could not keep that one demand. You see it's hard to be merciful. It's hard to be pure in spirit. It's hard to be a peacemaker. In the realm of the Beatitudes ~~is~~ the real challenge to creative spiritual living comes to the fore. So we cannot pretend to keep the commandments and forget the Beatitudes and become a true follower of Christ. And then we often excuse ourselves by thinking, "I'll never be found out." So long as it's kept a secret, so long as it's unknown then everything is well and good. But it can't be done, it will come to the fore sooner or later. We can keep it hidden in devious ways but eventually the stain that it marks upon our lives will come to the surface. We will be known for what we are. We can white wash our lives many times over but eventually the whitewash will break away and the true self can then be seen. There's a legend that tells about three souls that met after death. Walking along together, two discover that the third has a black stained mouth. Two discover that the second has hands that were stained. And two discover that the third had feet that were stained. And so the two said to the one, "Why is it that your mouth is stained black?" And he said, "While I was living, I bore false witness against my neighbor." And the two said to the second, "Why are your hands stained black" and he said, "My employer trusted me and from time to time I reached in to the cash box and took out money. It was just a little bit at a time and I was never discovered. But nonetheless I did take from my employers cash box." And then the two said to the third, "Why are your feet stained black?" And he said, "I stalked upon the virtue of a pure woman." All three had escaped detection in life, now it became the mark by which they were known. In a very real sense this is judgement, as Christ has taught it.

And now, this: In that vast quarry that reaches out to where we are to the goal toward which we live there are many closed doors. We can stuff those keyholes with alibis and excuses and we ~~x~~ shall never grow. But God has given us the key to open each, that he is truth and the response to that truth and that will open every door that shuts us out from the Kingdom of God.