

Sunday Morning, April 23, 1967

Sermon Subject: "MILK AND HONEY IN AN IMPOVERISHED LAND"

Paul, how did you do it? What was the secret behind your life?

Well, for one thing, forgetting the things that are behind, straining forward to the things that lie ahead. I press onward to the goal.

Read all the books of self help that you can find. You can't improve on that. If the Kingdom of God has not materialized in our generation, if the level on which we are enabled to live has not been reached, it can be layed to only one thing...the human factor. What a time to be alive. Fissures occur everyday in the barriers that heretofore have impeded the progress of man. Light is creeping through...promising new days, new experiences, new powers, new goals. And yet, in view of it all, we talk with long faces, haggard minds, with little hope. The great debate of this generation is simply this: Do we stand at the dawn of a new era, or do we face the dusk of a passing day? And it can be either. It depends upon what we, the instruments of God's power, do with what has been placed in our hands.

A group of men were climbing one of the high peaks in the Alps. When they had come almost in sight of the summit, they found that a great overhang of ice impeded their progress. They couldn't move around it. They couldn't reach out and go over it. They had gone as far as they could go. And here on this shelf beneath the overhand, they lay down to await the new day, to decided then whether they would try to reach the summit or whether they would go back down to the base of the mountain having failed. That night it grew colder and colder, and as the sun came up the next day, and the heat of the sun struck the ice, suddenly they heard a sound of many explosions. The mountain trembled. In a moment of panic they realized that this great overhang of ice was beginning to break away from the mountain. The heat of the sun in contrast against the coldness of the night caused it to break away. Some cried out in panic and fear, "It'll fall upon us, and it'll crush every one of us. There's no hope." But as it gave way from the side of the mountain, instead of falling down on the side of the mountain where they stood, it flung itself out into space and crashed into the abyss below. And now, looking upward, they saw the summit of the mountain bathed in the light of the sun. It was so easy now to climb to the top.

Here's where we find ourselves today. Unquestionable, there are many sounds of dissent and explosion. We fear for our safety...for our very existence, and whether it be the sound of a falling sheet of ice that will crush us, or whether it be a barrier breaking away that the light of the new day might flood in is yet to be seen. And yet, it rests primarily upon one thing...each one of us. What a day to be alive, but what are we doing. Are we growing, waiting, lamenting?

There was an incident in the Old Testament where Moses went back into Egypt and released all of the Egyptian families out of the captivity of the Pharoahs. Being led by the directions from God, he led them out into the wilderness, telling each of them that we're moving out into a land that has been promised...a land of milk and honey. And so they moved out with Moses...moving toward this great promise that lay ahead. They spent an entire generation wandering about in the wilderness and then came that glorious day when it was announced to all the people, "We have come to that land toward which we have been moving. We stand now upon the boundary of it. Be ready to move in and to possess." And yet at

this moment of triumph, there were those in the group who looking fondly back to the security of Egypt said, " I long for the fleshpots of Egypt. Let's move out of this wilderness. Let's not listen to those who would lead us forward. Remember the comfort of our homes? Yes, we were in slavery, but there were wonderful things about it, too." It's amazing how time erases the unpleasantness of lives and keeps alive only that which we remember fondly. It was true of the Israelites. Oh, I wish I were back in Egypt.

There were others who said, "The wilderness isn't so bad...Throw up a tent and keep out the cold night air and shield us from the hot sun of mid-day, and all of the land is ours. There's no inhibition here. Let's stay here in the wilderness where nobody comes to taunt us or to threaten us or to challenge our rights and privileges. Let's stay here in the wilderness."

But Moses, looking out into the land for which they had dreamed and awaited said, "Move out. Take possession of the land which the Lord, thy God, has prepared for you." Why, that's exactly what St. Paul was saying. Don't look back fondly to what has been. Don't become entangled with what is. Look out there where the sun is rising, where the promises and the hopes ~~of~~ are fulfilled. Move out and take hold of it. This is the charge that is leveled to each of us today as we live in this magnificent age. And yet, we're not moving out, we're not taking hold. We're not possessing the land. We're unsure of ourselves. We can't quite clarify the real issues of life. We can't identify the real purposes of our being here. We're ready to listen to anyone who speaks in a different tone of voice...who has a fresh approach or a new idea. And we find ourselves moving around in circles... without direction, without energy, without taking hold of the rich promises which we have awaited throughout the centuries.

One reason is that we look to the fleshpots of Egypt. How wonderful it was back then. There's a comic strip that appears in each week's comic section on "The Good Old Days". At times there is a portrayal of something that is so intensely desired by most of us today, but by and large, with tongue in cheek, it's the very thing that we would not go backward for. We're glad those days are gone. But our imagination has created in our minds an age that didn't really exist. True, today there seems to be a callousness about the sacred things in life, but was it any different then? When we think of the ideal of the past as it relates to the church and spirituality, I think that most of us think of a village...a quiet village on a summer's Sunday...bells ringing from white clapboard churches...the sound of organ music and familiar gospel hymns...buggies pulling up to the church door, and farmers alighting, mothers proud, tall, straight fathers. Down at the other end of the street is the community bandstand, and this afternoon the community band will play the good music, the good old summertime music that calms the spirit. The buzzing of insects, the bright sun shining on green grass and flowering shrubs. Everybody has a smile on his face. The stores are closed. No one is open for business. Everything is stopped, for this is the Sabbath Day, and after a good meal at mid-day, then everyone will move quietly to the tasks of the rest of the day...reading the Bible, sitting in the shade of the back yard or listening to the band play in the mid-summer shn. But that didn't exist. Let's not fool ourselves. Men were devious then as they are now. Beneath the exterior of all, there are still the same compulsions, the same motivations that we have today. We just forget all of that. In fact, this is a much greater day in many respects for the hungry are not quite as hungry, the poor not quite as poor, and the hope of peace is the greatest that it's ever been. The good old days? No! We can't afford the luxury of dreaming of a day that has gone. We must come to grips with the present age, for here is the vitality of life. Here is where the drama of life will be introduced.

Jesus warned us about putting new wine in old skins. Somehow, we have got to adapt ourselves to the age in which we live and see the pregnant principles of Christ relevant within

this age and not contingent upon a day that cannot be recaptured.

Nor, must we become entwined in the wilderness of the present...with the way things exist...satisfaction with what we have. To stay in the wilderness and not move out into the land of promise. This is the easiest way of them all. We can easily acclimate ourselves to what's happening. It isn't nearly as difficult as it has been in previous generations. But when we do, we fail ourselves as well as God. We drain ourselves of the vitality of living, for it is easier to become a part of the status quo than it is to become a pioneer. It is easy simply to do what everybody else is doing then to raise a prophetic voice. Have you ever moved out into the forest and been entangled in the vines and rhododendron bushes? It's almost as though they become human and they take hold of you and hold you there and won't let you loose. That's what happens today when we let the artificiality of this life have too strong a hold upon ourselves. First of all it takes hold of our creative minds, and we don't think originally. We parrot what everybody else is saying, and it sounds authentic because we hear it so many times. And what really is authentic in the things that men are seeking for today? So much of it is illusionary. When William Faulkner accepted the Nobel Prize for literature ~~and~~ in 1950, he said, "Man will prevail. Man will prevail, not because he is man, but because he has a soul, and that soul is immortal." Dare we forget that when we evaluate life in all of its compartments? If the soul of man is immortal, and the rest of man is only transient, why is it that we embellish ourselves with the transient while letting go to waste that one part of man upon which the destiny of man rests? The immortality of the soul. A vine that entangles us in the wilderness and would hold us there is the vine of complacency.

I read a clever article in Readers Digest in which the author said that to him the most loathsome word was the word "Oh". By ~~had~~ combining it with the word "Oh" the second time, it became even more distasteful. It can run the gamut of affectations and emotions that we can project by simply saying "Oh, Oh". But I say there's one word that's even more deceitful than that...the word "So?" How much of an attitude of life that is. Challenged with needs that lie about us, fortified with opportunities to produce something meaningful, doors opening to us to enable us to achieve the things that our fathers were never capable of achieving, and the response that we give, the attitude that most of us hold is simply, "So?" Complacency. Well, what does it matter anyhow? Who am I, just one? What can I do?

Paul said, "I forget what is back of me. It's done with, pleasant to remember, but I can't live in the past. At the present, I'm simply moving. I dare not become static. I don't dare stand still. But I look out into the future where there's a goal, and I work, I move toward that goal." ~~Moses said~~

Moses said, "The Lord has promised and prepared for you a land. Go out and possess it."

We have had glimpses of the kind of world that we can have, and it's a thrilling thing. The scalpel has opened the human body to new cures. The laboratory has brought miracle drugs that extend the years of a man's life. Transportation has opened the doors of every country of the world, so it need not be the explorer, the one man in a hundred who can experience all of the uniqueness of the world, but to each of us it all belongs. Not only this world, but the probing finger into outer space. Last night at midnight I was walking out in my lawn, and I looked up into the sky. The moon, round in all its beauty and fulness of light. I couldn't escape the thought that it's only a matter of a few years until someone living today

will be standing on that moon. It's almost impossible to think about. Here are the areas of life open to man that have never been experienced heretofore. But are we coming closer to equality of man? Dignity for everyone who lives? Full rights for each one who moves along with others? Are we coming closer to peace when we as fathers do not dread the day when our sons become old enough to go into the army? Are we coming closer to a time when those of us who have more than we can use are willing to share with those who do not have? The day affords the privilege if we're willing to move out and take hold of it. We pray for the Kingdom of God emerging on the earth in its totality. It can come. And we see the vague outlines of that Kingdom & just beyond the horizon. But somehow we got entangled, and we've lost the real vision. Yes, we must have renewal within the church, within man, but renewal is not so much important as restructuring of the human insight and goal. For what are we living for? That's the real issue. To what are we giving our talents and energy? That's the real issue. Unless the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it. So let's not fool ourselves for one moment. There's not going to be an age of automation, unless we can discover a new age of spiritual reality...a new enthusiasm for the cause of Christ...a ~~new~~ reinterpretation of the moral principles of Christ...a new engagement of the powers of God set loose in man.

I learned some time ago the difference between the National Park Service and the National Forest Service. The National Park Service preserves the past. The National Forest Service conserves for the future. Each of them is vitally important, and if in the Christian faith each of them is vitally important, we must preserve the greatness of the past, but we must prepare for the new day. The land is there. The promises are to be taken. We dare not stand idly by in camp, on the periphery of the achievement itself, for the Lord, your God, has prepared for you a land of milk and honey. And if there's a spiritual disappointment in your life because you can't find the milk and honey in an impoverished land. So one thing I'd do...forgetting the things that are past...moving steadily to the things that lie ahead...I press onward to the goal that is in Christ Jesus.