

LIVING WITH YOURSELF

"These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." John 15:11.

About ten miles up the Ohio River from Cincinnati is an amusement park, known as Coney Island, which has been in operation for perhaps something like a century. One of the interesting experiences which thousands have had during the summer months has been to go from Cincinnati to the park by boat. The name of this boat is the Island Queen, which has a calliope on the top deck and it played resounding numbers which were tossed back and forth between the Ohio and the Kentucky hills. Many considered the music beautiful and the trips quite exciting. At Coney Island was one amusement which they called the maze. It was ingeniously devised, the walls and ceilings of the twisting corridors being entirely of mirrors. You would go forward confidently toward what you were sure was the way out, and would walk directly into yourself in the mirror. Every way you turned you ran into yourself.

That is an exact symbol of what happens in life. No matter how you may try to escape, everywhere you go you will run directly into yourself. You cannot get away from yourself. There is one person with whom you must keep company as long as you live. You are irrevocably bound to him or to her. You cannot get away from him or from her no matter how hard you try. Since you can never get away from yourself, isn't it a matter of common sense to learn to live with yourself and enjoy it? But, do you enjoy living with yourself? Perhaps this is one of the most penetrating questions that you can ask yourself. It is truly wonderful when you can truthfully say that you enjoy living with yourself.

This situation becomes more serious as you think more about it. You are going to live with yourself all of your life. You need not expect to escape from yourself, regardless of how long you may live. Whatever may be around you, there will always be with you the world of your own making. Make up your mind to live in such a manner that you shall always be good company to yourself. There is more than mere humor in the story of the man who, when asked why he talked to himself, answered that it was because he wanted to hear a wise man talk to a wise man. We face the inescapables, either of living and walking in moral lowlands, and reaping the dire consequences to ourselves, or of living and walking with God and His children, and being good company to ourselves.

Most failures are the result of inward collapse instead of outward pressure. A sign in an old print shop reads: "Life is a grindstone, and whether it grinds a man down or polishes him up depends on the stuff he's made of." Therefore, one of the major tasks of the Christian is to learn how to live with himself. This is the key to true success or to real failure. God's Word says: "He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city" (Proverbs 16:32). How may we learn the interesting art of living with ourselves? If you want to learn how to live with yourself and enjoy it, you must do certain things.

I. Accept Yourself As Your Biggest Problem.

Are you having an enjoyable time living with yourself? If not, it is too bad because you are going to have to live with yourself throughout your life. For some of you that may not be an attractive prospect, but others of you may regard it as an appealing prospect.

A baker, who lived not far from Quebec, bought the butter he used from a neighboring farmer. One day he became suspicious that the butter was not the right weight. For several days he weighed the butter and found it getting lighter and lighter. Finally he had the farmer arrested for fraudulent dealing. At the trial the judge was surprised when the farmer told him he had scales but no weights with which to weigh the butter. The judge asked him what he used for weights. The farmer explained it this way: "When the baker commenced buying this butter of me, I thought I would get my bread of him. I get the one pound loaf, and I use it as the weight for my butter. If the weight of the butter is wrong, he is to blame himself.

When we are dishonest with ourselves, all life turns against us, and everything goes wrong with our world. The fact is, we usually are our own worst enemies. So frequently we stand in our own way. Our principal problems are not outside ourselves, but inside our own hearts. Centuries ago Bernard de Clairvaux said: "Nothing can work me damage except myself; I am a real sufferer by my own fault." Ever remember the words of Cassius: "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

Two children were playing in a yard. They were about twenty feet from each other. Suddenly, one of the children stumbled and got a hard fall. When he got up, he was furious, perhaps angry at his own clumsiness. As soon as he got to his feet, he turned to the other child and said, "Look what you made me do!"

All of us are too willing and ready to blame our troubles on others or on our environment. Everybody manufactures excuses for his conduct. Adam manufactured the first excuse. He ate the forbidden fruit, and when God confronted him with his transgression he tried to blame someone else for what he had done. He said that it was Eve who had caused him to disobey God and to eat the forbidden fruit. When the woman was confronted with the matter, she adopted the alibi habit and blamed the serpent for what she and Adam had done. The fallaciousness of our alibis is usually apparent. Some of us think that we always have bad luck, while others always have good luck. Channing Pollock, who estimated luck at about three per cent of life, said: "The only good luck many great men ever had was being born with the ability and determination to overcome bad luck."

So many think that their difficulties arise from the faults of other people. Someone seizes an opportunity from us. Someone fails to appreciate us. Somebody continually makes it hard for us. Much of our misery we attribute to others. Frequently this sort of thing is largely

in one's own imagination. It is easy to be conscious of the faults of others and unconscious of our own. Like the boy who was saying his prayers and his mother asked, "Did you pray to be a better boy?" "Yes," said the lad, "and I also put in a word for you and dad."

It is natural for people to want to place the responsibility for their mistakes on someone else. But we do not have any right to place the responsibility for what we are and what we do on others, or on our circumstances. After all, we are responsible for what we do with the circumstances of life which have come to us. Abraham Lincoln might have blamed his outward circumstances of life and never amounted to anything. He was born in very poor circumstances. His family did not have any social standing. He was extremely homely in appearance. He did not have any educational advantages. He had to dig for all of the knowledge that he received. If outward circumstances enabled a person to achieve usefulness and success, Lincoln never would have amounted to anything.

If we want to live with ourselves successfully, we must not be cowardly in facing ourselves. We can't afford to be satisfied with pretenses, excuses, and deceptions. We must do business with our own hearts. We must fight out our battles in the inner recesses of our being. No one is defeated until he is defeated inside. And no life can be on good terms with itself until it is right in its relationship with God. The famous psychologist Dr. J. A. Hadfield put it this way: "Our primary task is not to fit a man to face his environment, but to fit him to face himself. A man cannot meet the onslaughts of the outside world successfully unless he has first established harmony within his own soul. Only when he has settled the conflicts within himself is he ready to face his environment." Men enjoy peace with themselves only when they are at peace with God. When we are at peace with God, we are at peace with ourselves. And when we are at peace with ourselves, we are at peace with our world.

When we are honest enough to straighten ourselves out, we find that many of our problems solve themselves. It was said of Paul that "He was forced to go into the dark tribunal of his own conscience and set himself before himself." It will prove wholesome for us to set ourselves often in a stern and honest self-examination. Self-analysis must have been the central idea in the mind of the great philosopher when he admonished, "Know thyself." When Nehemiah was facing a crisis on the one hand, and a group of lethargic, disgruntled men on the other hand, he said, "I consulted with myself" (Nehemiah 5:7). He who attempts a thorough self-analysis will soon become conscious of having entered upon an exceedingly great and fascinating venture.

You should face the fact that you can be your own worst enemy. Actually you can get in your own way and stumble over yourself. As you go through life you can take yourself too seriously, or you can live with yourself to such an extent that your mind will get confused. As Carlyle said: "Always there is a black spot in our sunshine; it is the shadow of ourselves." Self-pity produces so much unhappiness and misery. In the

opinion of Professor Jung, one-third of the people who came to his nerve clinic were suffering from the effects of constantly being sorry for themselves. When a person thinks only and always about himself, his likes and dislikes, and the hardness of his lot in life, he is on the way to physical and nervous disaster. Such a thing is distressing in one who does not make any profession of Christianity, but it is calamitous in one who is a Christian.

The outstanding example in the scriptures of one who was sorry for himself was the elder brother in Luke 15. By his self-centeredness he banished happiness from his life, lost all sense of values, and robbed himself of the joys of fellowship. If we give way to this sad complaint, we shall be defeated, too. Change of circumstances won't cure it; what is needed is a change of disposition. When Christina Rossetti became conscious of her tendency to self-pity she would pray, "God harden me against myself." In your quiet moments, when you are indulging in self-pity, ask yourself the question, "Who promised me that I would go to heaven on a flowery bed of ease?" Release from self-pity is possible when we look outward rather than inward; when we begin to think of others rather than ourselves.

If you want to learn how to live with yourself and enjoy it, you must not only accept yourself as your biggest problem, but you must learn to

II. Control Your Thoughts.

R. L. Williams, president of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad, told an interesting story on himself. It was in the early days of his first job with the railroad. He was promoted to a ticket window. He was just a boy, and he felt his importance. He began to think high and mighty thoughts about himself. He developed the habit of being brusque and sarcastic. One day, when he tried being rough with a traveling man, the man said to him, "You'll have to be courteous, sonny, if you expect to get anywhere. You're going to need friends, and a smart aleck doesn't make anything but enemies. Get wise to yourself." So young Williams began to experiment with controlling his temper. He pretended to like people. It was a pose at first, but to his surprise it worked. The experiment of controlling his thoughts and attitudes became a habit and then a pleasure. When relating the experience, he said, "I am convinced that this incident changed the course of my life. Every important advancement I have ever had was implemented by friends." The Christian needs to explore the possibilities of mind over matter, if he is to be victorious.

The power of thought is one of our greatest assets. Emerson said, "A man is what he thinks about all day long." Marcus Aurelius summed it up in eight words: "Our life is what our thoughts make it." It cannot be otherwise. If your thoughts are in the gutter, you will be in the gutter. If your thoughts are centered on the fine and clean things of life, you can live as a Christian should. Pgymy thoughts make little men; great thoughts make big men." "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." Christ taught that thoughts of self-interest, jealousy, and

envy make men weaklings, but that thoughts of confidence, trust, and love make men strong and victorious. Christ knew that the thoughts are always the forerunners of the deeds. Before a thief grabs money, he thinks about stealing. Before the act of licentiousness is committed, it has been thought about in the mind. Everything hinges upon the thinking. That is why the Bible says, "Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind."

You are what your thoughts have made you. And, if you want to know what you will be ten years from now, you will be what you're thinking about now, or what you will think about during the next ten years. There isn't a person who cannot have his life changed wonderfully by getting his mental attitudes reconditioned. A most important part of reconditioning our mental attitudes is to have a daily process of mind-emptying. Our minds tend to accumulate a vast impedimenta of fears, inferiority feelings, resentments, gripes, and grudges. These things get lodged in the mind, and must be removed or one will be miserable.

If you want to live with yourself and enjoy it, you must not only accept yourself as your biggest problem, and control your own thoughts, but you must also

III. Realize That You Are Responsible For Your Actions.

Lawrence A. Kimpton, chancellor of the University of Chicago, once said: "It has been my observation that character is formed and maturity is won by solving one's own problems without outside help. Show me a man without problems, and I'll show you a very dull man, indeed." He cautioned against growing a race of "leaners," people who can't stand on their own feet and fight their own battles.

Robert N. McMurry, a consulting psychologist, made an extensive survey of 220 people who never quite made a go of life. They were able-bodied, intelligent, and well-trained. But they were only partially successful. Why? The one big reason was that they could not assume responsibility. In their youth they were protected from the consequences of their own shortcomings by indulgent parents. In their work they blamed their failures on others. They criticized their associates. They sulked if they did not have their own way.

The efforts of science, education, and government to relieve the individual from the consequences of his own actions are detrimental to personal character and responsible living. When a life is underwritten and subsidized, it weakens and deteriorates. God surely did not intend for human life to be coddled. It is through struggle that stamina comes. When things are made too easy for us, life falls to pieces. God honors men who are willing to shoulder their own responsibilities, fight their own battles, and pay the penalty for their own mistakes. He that ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city.

Sometime ago a businessman was quoted in Life magazine as saying, "This country is enjoying a stampede away from responsibility." In his usual

sophisticated way Ogden Nash said, "Why did the Lord give us agility if not to escape responsibility?"

Military men have heard on every side, "Volunteer for nothing! Don't be an eager beaver! What is it to me? Let George do it!" Theodore Roosevelt said that among those things which will destroy America is the attitude of "Safety first instead of duty first." Do you mean to say, "The lostness of this generation, the injustices of our time, and the many problems which beset us all are none of my affair! Let someone else get involved. Not me!" The idea that they should do something about some of life's problems is foreign to many people. Nevertheless, none of us can escape our responsibilities. Everyone must give an account for the way in which he utilizes his opportunities and bears his responsibilities. Get right with God and yourself. Put yourself in the hands of the Lord and do all you can for Him and for others.

Bishop Westcott said, "A life of calculated self-sacrifice becomes a spring of immeasurable power." As an illustration of that great statement, I quote a dedicated nurse. She said, "I never knew before that life was good for anything, but what one could get out of it. Now I know that the real fun lies in seeing how much one can put into life for others. The most miserable, smashed-up life could blossom again, if only it will blossom for others." Do all the good you can, to all the people you can, in all the ways you can, as long as ever you can. By doing so you can follow in the steps of Him Who spent His wonderful life in just that way. "He went about doing good." As you follow Him, you will enjoy living with yourself.