

THE SIN OF BEING ORDINARY

"Are you not behaving like ordinary men?" I Corinthians 3:3 (Moffatt).
"Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men." I Corinthians 14:20.

In writing to the Corinthians Paul inquires if they are not behaving exactly like the commonplace, ordinary run of men and women about them. Jesus taught that a man who follows Him must not be ordinary, but he must be extraordinary. It is not a matter of talents, or gifts, or genius, or ability; it is simply a matter of living in a way that is higher and better than the world's way. The Christian way of life is superior. Jesus counselled men to live in such a way that it would stand out and reveal itself as the sun is seen because of what it is and where it is. The extraordinary Christ calls for extraordinary Christians. It is a sin to live "like ordinary men" when we have such an extraordinary Christ, and when a genuine, extraordinary Christian life has such power for God and for good.

"Mediocre" is defined as "of only middle quality," "having only a moderate degree of excellence," "ordinary." In speaking of Amos Barton, George Eliot said something which is descriptive of many today: "It was not in his nature to be superlative in anything, unless, indeed, he was superlatively middling, the quintessential extract of mediocrity." Mediocrity is the usage of only forty strings on a harp of one thousand strings. It is reaping four rows when ten are ready for reaping. It is what you see when a stenographer uses three fingers and one eye in typing letters—what you see and hear when an organist uses only a few of the keys on the keyboard. It is a man with locomotive power doing pushcart work; a man with incandescent light talents working and making sputtering candle light for God. It is a man with eagle wings fluttering about like a sparrow instead of soaring. It is a man with pipe organ abilities making wheezy saxophone music for God. It is somebody with steam-shovel talents doing teaspoon work -- with diamond and ruby talents worth as little to God's cause through the church as a punctured Japanese nickel in a Chinese bazaar. It is an artist using his ability to paint landscapes in doing nothing but whitewashing backyard fences. Phillips Brooks knew something of the menace of mediocrity when he said to a Boston audience: "It is time for Boston to get out of the peck measure into the bushel measure."

Much of the world's misery is caused by childish adults. "Whether you speak of marital unhappiness or family disagreement or contention between management and labor or strife between nations, the unmistakable characteristics of childishness --- self-consciousness, self-importance, and unwillingness to accept responsibility -- are present to throw sand in the wheels of progress and growth."

Wathinson expressed something of the tragedy of being ordinary when he wrote: "Large areas of our inheritance are unsown, unreaped; all kinds of beginnings abide sorrowfully incomplete. We live in the strange world of the undone." It was a great compliment paid Gladstone when of him a man wrote: "He would not compromise with mediocrity."

Moreover, I think the menace of occasional mediocrity as an evil was set forth when someone wrote of Wordsworth: "He often made his poetic eagle do the work of a clucking hen." Surely the sin of being ordinary must have been in the mind of Disraeli when he said: "It is a wretched thing to be gratified with mediocrity when the excellent lies before us."

Vance Havner spoke of the sin of being ordinary as manifesting itself in light-hearted unconcern and shameful shrinking of duty when he said: "Salvation has become a night-cap instead of a helmet. We have those in our churches who have plenty of sentiment but make no sacrifice; who sing lustily in the choir on Sunday but live lustfully in the world all week; the kind of people who, when a piano is to be moved, escape by carrying the bench." One who bears in his body scars from wounds received in the bloody terrors of war, recently said: "The old system of life is being shaken to its very foundation. The economic structure is crashing, the political life of nations is threatened; the social standards of right and righteousness are being challenged, yet no one seems to know why. And the remedies that are proposed are remedies of little minds, little men." Dr. Wade Bryant wrote: "One of the critical hours of history has come, and the churches are not ready for it in vision in compassion.. in the spirit of sacrificein witnessing....in Christian living."

In his book, THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST, Dr. E. Y. Mullins wrote: "The Chief difficulty is that God's people have been content to think in terms of conventional Christianity, comfortable and smug, without a sense of conquest or ambition for great things. Jesus did not set out to catch sparrows or subdue rabbits."

Can we avoid the sin of being ordinary? Yes. How? By becoming mature people. Some people may be overgrown. Some may be undergrown. But, be that as it may, we know our churches are needing people of strong will, of heroisms, of clear vision -- people who can lead others out of complacency and mediocrity into life, out of the dolittle attitude and life into the do-much attitude and life ---- people who weigh sixteen ounces to the pound for God, who measure thrity-six inches to the yard for God, and who strike twelve for God.

Paul says, "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." There is the danger of arrested development. Then there are stunted Christians who should be growing Christians, little Christians who should be great and big Christians, feeble believers who should be rugged and strong, puny folks who should be powerful. To them life is a plaything with no great meaning. There are Christians who are content with a corner when continents await their conquest. Boreham said: "The soul grows fat only on immensities, infinities, eternities; and life clothes itself in most vigorous realities in altitudes, magnitudes, infinities." Paul had immature people in mind when he wrote: "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able." Babies pout -- so do many grown folks today. Babies get offended -- so do many adults today. Babies imagine things -- so do many advanced in years. Babies seek first place for themselves -- so do many grown-ups today.

What would you think of Beethoven, who could make surging seas of tone subservient to his rod, if he had always been twanging away on a Jew's harp, making mournful monotony on jagling inharmony? What praise would come to Henry W. Grady with power to bathe two antagonistic sections in fraternal light in twenty minutes, if, with national matters of worth in the balance, he had done nothing but recite MotherGoose rhymes? What praise would have Angelo deserved, who could "raise children unto God from the sterile womb of stone," had he whittled away with a penknife on soft wood? Yet that is done when you see quick-flashing anger over trifles, sinful sensitiveness, place-seeking peevishness -- like children have, like Ahab had who, when Naboth refused to sell his vineyard, went home sulkily, and went to bed and turned his face to the wall and would not eat.

If we would overcome the sin of being ordinary we must seek to be always and everywhere not midget men, but mighty men, not minimum men, but maximum men. In his quaint wisdom Will Rogers revealed the tragedy of the mediocre when, in the midst of a financial depression, he said, "The trouble with our financial giants was that they did not giant."

It was known of Caleb on earth, and recorded of him in heaven, that he followed the Lord fully." He was a maximum servant of God. Even when he was eighty years of age he showed that the mediocre desire was not in his heart when he said, "Give me this mountain." Jesus said, "Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." "If any man compel you to go one mile with him, go with him two." Meaning what? Do more than the bare stint requirements. Do more than you are asked to do. Concerning Desdemona Iago said, "She counts it a vice in her virtue not to do more than she is asked to do." When the tabernacle was built, the people did maximum service. After Earle Sande rode the great horse Man O' War to victory in the Kentucky Derby, he remarked about the magnificence of that horse by saying, "It was like being on a runaway locomotive." No mediocrity there. Yet, many in God's work run like limping, stubborn mules who really have Man O' War abilities. One likes to think of Ty Cobb, number one man in baseball's Hall of Fame, with a batting average of .367 for twenty-four years. When he was a lad in college he remarked, "I enjoy being my best." What glory would be in our church if all our members enjoyed being their best!

We need to be maximum men and women no matter how many Goliaths challenge; in forbearance no matter how many Shimeis curse; in prayer no matter how many prophets of Baal mock; in faith no matter how many laugh at the shaking of Satan's spears; in service no matter how many jealous Sauls seek to hurt. We need to be Daniels in refusal to conform to this world, no matter if lions of ridicule roar. We need to be maximum people in loyalty, no matter how many there are who like Demas forsake, "having loved this present world."

One who is maximum for God does not pray a little, but much, does not love a little, but much, does not serve a little, but much, does not forgive a little, but much, does not show a little loyalty, but much, does not read the Bible a little, but much, does not attend church occasionally, but often. Maximum people, showing a divine discontent, will show a vital interest in the great stretches of the unattained.

Every person, if he would honor God, must master an individual. That one is himself, or herself. The one who gives you the most trouble is self. And one of your great tasks is to see that self weighs what God wants you to weigh and shines as brightly as God wants you to shine. When Oliver Cromwell's soldiers went to arrest the members of Parliament, the members had disappeared. The soldiers seized the old speaker of Parliament and demanded of him where the members were. The old man replied: "Gentlemen, I have no eyes to see and no ears to hear and no mouth to speak save as directed by Parliament." Oh, what wonders of service and spiritual achievements for glory of God would be ours if we would say to the world, the flesh, and the devil, that we have no eyes to see, no ears to hear, no mouth to speak, no feet to walk, and no hands to work save as directed by Jesus Christ Who came to earth to do the will of God Who sent Him.

When people are mastered by the Master they become great. When people are mastered by Jesus, the Great Unlike, they are unlike ordinary people. Jesus, a critic, but not a cynic, is literature's loftiest ideal. Brave, though never known in His day as a hero, He is the world's greatest example of perfection in suffering. Capable of anger, but never rash, He is the ideal of righteous indignation against sin.

Firm, but not obstinately stubborn, He would never by a hair's breadth veer from the path that led to the Roman cross. Pious, but not impractical, He illustrated in daily life every doctrine of His heavenly mind. Humble ever, but cowardly never, He faced Herod's soldiers without flinching. Gentle, but not effeminate, He showed us the daring and heroism of genuine gentleness. Superior to the world, yet braving its sympathy, He challenged it to convince Him of sin. Dignified, but simply, He adorned the doctrine of God in all things, wearing ever the white flowers of a sinless life in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Economical, but never miserly, He taught it is more blessed to give than to receive. Domestic in His tastes, but never having a home, He had power to prepare a place in the Father's House wherein the many mansions are. Having fortitude without fatalism. He finished the work God gave Him to do. Having generosity without wastefulness, He refused to have anything to do with dividing an inheritance. Youthful in years, yet venerable as the centuries in His influence. He has perfumed the stifling air of the continents. Eager, but not impatient, He prophesied and promised that the gates of hell should not prevail against His church. Christ's mastery and power on this earth are the highest in a Christ-mastered and fully-yielded human life.

A Mexican of culture was saved. He prayed this prayer -- which was later put in print:

I am only a spark; make me a fire,
I am only a string; make me a lyre;
I am only a drop; make me a fountain,
I am only an ant hill; make me a mountain.
I am only a feather; make me a wing.
I am only a serf; make me a king.
I am only a link; make a a chain.
I am only a sprinkle; make me a rain.

We would do well to make that a daily prayer ---remembering that God, through the great apostle, says: "Brethren, be not children in understanding: howbeit in malice be ye children, but in understanding be men." I Corinthians 14:20.