

Rec 2-18-88

A SOCIETY OUT OF CONTROL

Exodus 20:1-17

I don't think any of us would term television personality, Phil Donahue, a rigid moralist. On his show a few weeks ago, one of the guests was a man who has written a book on "sexual addiction." The thesis of the doctor's book is that there are people in our society who are addicted to various kinds of inappropriate sexual behavior just as other persons may be addicted to drugs or alcohol. Often in the program, as he described problems such as promiscuity, child molestation, obsession with pornography, etc., the doctor noted that many of those with severe problems in these areas had themselves been sexually abused as children. Indeed, those who have been abused as children are more likely to experience problems not only with sexual addiction, but drug addiction and other forms of socially unacceptable behavior as well.

At the end of the program Phil Donahue asked the doctor if the problems we are facing as a society are not more likely to grow greater rather than diminish because of the breakup of so many families. "Is it not true," he asked, "that in the future we could see more problems than we could possibly imagine of people who are maladjusted, who are addicted because of the home environment?"

The good doctor responded, "We are becoming an addiction inducing society."

There is a growing consciousness that our society is going out of control morally. There is also a growing realization that a morally out-of-control society is a sick society. That is not simply the value judgment of a pastor. It is a growing consciousness among people from many backgrounds, who are casting a concerned eye at our society.

Ted Koppel, the much respected broadcaster of ABC's Nightline, parted from his usual neutral stance and offered something of a piercing sermon on morals at Duke University recently. In his address he said, "We have actually convinced ourselves that slogans will save us. Shoot up if you must, but use a clean needle. Enjoy sex whenever and with whomever you wish but wear a condom..." Then Koppel gave this sharp rebuke, "The answer is, 'No.' Not because it isn't cool or smart or because you might end up in jail or dying in an AIDS ward but because it is wrong. Because we have spent 5,000 years as a race of rational human beings trying to drag ourselves out of the primeval slime by searching for truth and moral absolutes. In its purest form, truth is not a polite tap on the shoulder, it's a howling reproach. What Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai were not the Ten Suggestions." (1)

There is a growing consciousness that our society is out of control and that such a society is sick. John Morley once traveled from England to Canada to address the graduating class of a university. He began his speech by saying, "I have traveled 4,000 miles to tell you that there is a difference between right and wrong."

Out of the covenant relationship God established with Israel a man named Moses was given a set of commandments, which we have come to know as the Ten Commandments. They tell us that there is a difference between right and wrong.

The first four of those Ten Commandments deal with our relationship with our Creator. "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me... You shall not make for yourself a graven image... You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain... Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy."

The remaining six commandments deal with our relationship with others. "Honor your father and mother... You shall not kill... You shall not commit adultery... You shall not steal... You shall not bear false witness... You shall not covet..."

The Ten Commandments. Ten rules of human conduct. Often ridiculed. "Blessed are the pure in heart," said one cynic, "for they shall inherit the earth." Often ignored. It is said that although Napoleon III could speak four languages, he couldn't say "No" in any of them. When tempted to do wrong, he would twirl his mustache and yield to the temptation. His wife threatened to cut off his mustache unless he learned to say "No."

We have a lot of people in our society who cannot say "No" to temptation. According to an August 1987 Newsweek magazine there was a sting operation in New York to uncover graft, corruption among public officials. The sting involved 106 public officials in New York. US Attorney Rudolph Giuliani made the following statement. "On 106 occasions bribes were offered or discussed. On 105 of those occasions, the public official involved accepted the bribe. On the other occasion the public official turned it down because he did not think the amount was large enough." (2)

Ancient myths tell about Diogenes who took up his lamp in search of an honest man. Someone said that when he got to New York somebody stole his lamp.

Our friends in New York are used to such humor. But we know that they have no monopoly on yielding to temptation. There is a consciousness that the world is out of control!

For twenty-five years the occupants of a building in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania complained about the trouble they had adjusting the temperature of their building.

The higher they set the thermostat, they claimed, the colder the temperature. When warm weather came, turning down the thermostat seemed to make the building hotter. Much to their surprise they discovered there was a reason for that. That whole building had been supplied with thermostats in good working order. But the covers were put on upside down. So when they tried to cool the building, they were actually turning up the heat.

Somehow our moral thermostats seem to be upside down. Thus the big issue of our day is character. Humorist Robert Orben put it this way recently, "Let him who is without sin contact the Democratic National committee."

How did we get into this situation? I AM CONVINCED THAT THE LOSS OF TRANSCENDENCE IN OUR SOCIETY IS AT THE ROOT OF OUR MORAL DECLINE. Transcendence is simply a fancy word for a sense of the presence of God in our life. When the theologians were saying a few years ago that God is dead, they meant that God had lost his place of importance in our life as a society. We turn to medical doctors when we are sick, psychologists when we are fearful, prominent role models when we desire to know about right behavior. Where does God make any difference in our daily lives?

This is why we must recapture the Ten Commandments as more than mere suggestions. There is an immortal Creator who has spoken through the Law and the Prophets and most clearly through Jesus of Nazareth to show us what is good and right and lasting. The ground of all morality and ethics is the realization that "I am the Lord your God...you shall have no other gods before me."

In Romans 1:25 St. Paul teaches us that people who worship the creature rather than the creator give themselves to unnatural passions. "Worshipping the creature, rather than the creator." Is that not an accurate description of our secular society?

Consider this. The fourth commandment is remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy. There was a time when people were put into stocks in our land for having too much fun on the Sabbath. We would not want that. In Jesus' time the Sabbath was observed even more rigidly. William Barclay tells us that one of the works forbidden on the Sabbath was carrying a burden. The legalists insisted that a burden be defined. So definition was given. A burden is "food equal in weight to a dried fig, enough wine for mixing in a goblet, milk enough for one swallow...ink enough to write two letters..." and so on endlessly. Jesus had not much patience with such pious gnat-straining. He taught that man was not made for the Sabbath but the Sabbath for man. We have swung the pendulum completely to the other side. Does it not disturb you that even among Christians, there is almost total disregard of this ancient teaching? Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. Why? As

a reminder--a reminder once a week that we do not exist for ourselves. We are but creatures. There is a Creator.

We have put the emphasis on the creature, and forgotten the Creator. And the sad thing is that when that happens we end up demeaning ourselves.

The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, "The sense of greatness is the ground work of morals." What is it that gives us greatness? Is it not that we were created in the image of the divine? That he breathed into us his own breath, his own spirit? We have lost that sense of the transcendent. We worship the creature rather than the creator.

WITH OUR LOSS OF TRANSCENDENCE HAS COME A BLURRING OF WHAT IS RIGHT AND WRONG, ACCEPTABLE AND UNACCEPTABLE, APPROPRIATE AND INAPPROPRIATE. Thus many people wander in a moral and spiritual fog. The sad and ironic result is not more freedom but, as St. Paul observed, more slavery.

Years ago there were some psychologists who thought that the fences around the playgrounds of children were negative influences. So they took down the fences and gave the children total freedom--no boundaries, no fences. But a strange thing happened. When the fences were removed, the children did not run the length and breadth of the playground the way they used to. Instead, they huddled in the middle of the playground and demonstrated behavior indicating intense feelings of insecurity. As soon as the fences were replaced, their feelings of security and freedom were renewed.(3)

Rollo May, in his outstanding book, Love and Will, observed at one point that the gospel of free expression of every impulse disperses experience like a river with no banks. Its water is spilled and wasted as it flows without direction. Years ago Thomas Hobbes used the metaphor of a highway lined with hedges. "The king," he said, "has placed hedges along the road, not to stop travellers in their journey but to keep them in the way."

We are not proposing a new moralism. Nevertheless the human creature needs guidelines. That is how we get to where we want to go as individuals and as a society. That is how we fulfill the highest meaning of what it is to be a child of God. The Ten Commandments are the best set of guidelines by which any society may govern itself.

Having declared, however, the importance of the Ten Commandments, one more word needs to be spoken and that is this: STRICTLY ABIDING BY THE TEN COMMANDMENTS WILL NOT SAVE US. No matter how committed, no matter how strait-laced, no matter how law-abiding we may be, there is no saving power in simply living up to the demands of these great commandments. As Paul

so often reminds us, the law only confines, it only restricts, it does not empower. We need a higher law for that. The Ten Commandments tell us what we should not do. They do not give us that ingredient that Jesus gave us to make life count--the ingredient of self giving love.

Dr. Peter Rhea Jones once told about a lady who had that kind of love. In a church he once attended there was a predictable ritual in the Wednesday night service. "There was the usual moment when the pastor asked, 'Is there anyone else for whom we wish to pray?' Every time there was one individual who always spoke up. And who always said the same thing. Sometimes people tittered gently. He would say, 'Don't forget Mrs. Nielsen.' And this went on for years. I did not know who Mrs. Nielsen was," said Dr. Jones. "The man was an individual whose speech was broken, whose gait was impaired, whose health was poor, and who all of his life had know a rather harried existence. When Mrs. Nielsen died, the story broke. It seems that when he was a little boy he would dress up in clothes a little too fancy for some boys' taste. He would go out to play. He had all kinds of physical disabilities, and in addition to that he was wearing these fancy clothes. Some of the other boys roughed him up, threw rocks at him, chased him down the sidewalk, or made fun of him. On many occasions this little fellow became so frightened that he would dive into the neighborhood grocery store where Mrs. Nielsen worked. He would run back to where she was and hide behind her skirts and shiver and shake with anxiety. That understanding woman would put her hand around him and would sit him down and would talk to him and show love and care. And now late in life, when she is bedridden and a shut-in and cannot come to church, John remembered. 'Don't forget Mrs. Nielsen,' he would say. She was a person in touch with the hurt of others."

I wish every frightened boy and girl in this world could have a Mrs. Nielsen in their lives. That means that some of us would have to go beyond being law-abiding, respectable, minding the Ten Commandments. We are grateful for those commandments. Our society needs to return to acknowledging the validity of those commandments and the God from whom they come. But we need more than that. We need the mind and heart of Jesus who kept all the commandments but taught us that the greatest commandment is to love.

- (1) Catalina (Az) UMC newsletter, 12-13-87.
- (2) August 24, 1987, p. 11.
- (3) Tony Bland

THE ADVICE NOBODY WANTS

Exodus 20: 1-17

Wind, Sand, and Stars is the title of an interesting book by Count Saint-Exupery. One incident is especially inspiring. The author and his comrade Guillaumet were flying mail over the Andes for the government of Chile. One morning his pal took off in the face of a fierce snow storm. Ice on his wings, the heavy snow and terrific winds kept him from rising over the mountains and forced him to land on a frozen lake.

Guillaumet dug a shelter under the cockpit and surrounded himself with mail bags. There he huddled for two days and two nights. When the storm subsided it took him five days and four nights to find his way back to civilization, crawling on hands and knees in temperature twenty degrees below zero.

How did he overcome the fatal desire to lie down and rest? He thought of his wife and sons and how they needed him. He thought of his responsibility to get the mail through. He survived, although his hands and feet were so badly frozen that they had to be amputated. When Saint-Exupery described his comrade's bitter experience and his superhuman struggle to survive, he summed it all up in one sentence: "To be a man is, precisely, to be responsible."¹

Let me repeat those important words: To be a man--we could substitute person--or better yet, a human being--"To be a human being is to be responsible."

There it is: a crucial theological statement--a statement so critical to our understanding of life that it often goes unspoken and unexamined. To be a human being is to be responsible. God placed Adam and Eve in the garden. They were to be responsible in tending the garden and keeping God's one commandment: "of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you shall eat of it you shall die." (Gen. 2: 17).

Adam and Eve had two sons--Cain and Abel. Cain slays Abel in a jealous rage. When confronted with his crime, Cain cries out, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In other words, "Am I responsible for my brother?" A lawyer once asked Jesus a question very similar to that one. When Jesus said that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourself, the lawyer asks, "Who is my neighbor?" In other words, "How far does my responsibility extend?" Am I responsible for my family, my immediate neighbors, the people in my own city, people in Ethiopia? Where does it all end?

Jesus' disciples struggled with this same question. Is the gospel just for Jews or is it for the Gentiles as well? Am I responsible for people who respond positively to me or am I responsible for my enemies?

Our Old Testament text today contains that table of moral injunctions we know as the Ten Commandments. What are the Ten Commandments but an attempt to define human responsibility? Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Honor thy father and mother.

What are my responsibilities – to my neighbor – to my God? The Ten Commandments seek to answer those questions.

To be a human being is to be responsible. We say to you young people, “Be responsible.” We say to married couples – to new drivers, every few years to voters – act responsibly. Every facet of our life together depends on people acting responsibly. That is such an obvious truth, and yet we so often fail to deal with it.

In fact, is there any of us who wants to have someone say to us, “act responsibly.” Do you teenagers want to hear it from your parents? Do we want to hear it from our spouse or even from our pastor? Responsibility is already a heavy burden for many of us. What we really long for is escape. How many alcoholics and drug addicts are chemically snared while seeking escape? How many extramarital affairs and other destructive episodes are the simple product of persons seeking escape from responsibility. We are like Jose Jimenez. Remember Jose? He was a very popular comedian a few years back. He had a routine in which he played an astronaut being interviewed by newsmen just before his blast-off to the moon. One reporter asks, “Tell me, do you have any grave doubts about your success?” Jose responds, “Please don’t use the word ‘grave’.” Another newsman asks, “How do you think you’ll feel when you leave earth and pass on into space?” Jose says, “Please don’t use those words ‘pass on’.” Another asks, “Do you have any fear about this undertaking?” Jose answers, “Please don’t use that word ‘undertaking’.”

Who among us would not rather escape from, rather than face up, to our problems? And yet, to be a human being is to be responsible. To be emotionally mature is to be responsible. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to be responsible.

If you have read Dr. M. Scott Peck’s very popular book The Road Less Travelled you know the emphasis he places upon responsibility. A psychiatrist and a medical doctor, he writes:

“The extent to which people will go psychologically to avoid assuming responsibility for personal problems, while always sad, is sometimes almost ludicrous. A career sergeant in the army, stationed in Okinawa and in serious trouble because of his excessive drinking, was referred for psychiatric evaluation and, if possible, assistance. He denied that he was an alcoholic, or even that his use of alcohol was a

personal problem, saying, "There's nothing else to do in the evenings in Okinawa except drink."

"Do you like to read?" I asked.

"Oh yes, I like to read, sure."

"Then why don't you read in the evening instead of drinking?"

"It's too noisy to read in the barracks."

"Well, then, why don't you go to the library?"

"The library is too far away."

"Is the library farther away than the bar you go to?"

"Well, I'm not much of a reader. That's not where my interests lie."

"Do you like to fish?" I then inquired.

"Sure, I love to fish."

"Why not go fishing instead of drinking?"

"Because I have to work all day long."

"Can't you go fishing at night?"

"No, there isn't any night fishing in Okinawa."

"But there is," I said. "I know several organizations that fish at night here. Would you like me to put you in touch with them?"

"Well, I really don't like to fish."

"What I hear you saying," I clarified, "is that there are other things to do in Okinawa except drink, but the thing you like to do most in Okinawa is drink."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"But your drinking is getting you in trouble, so you're faced with a real problem aren't you?"

With a curse the sergeant answered, "This island would drive anyone to drink."²

There was no hope for that sergeant if he would not face up to the fact that he had a problem.

A much different story is that of Lauren Chapin. Do you remember that name? She played the youngest child Kathy, affectionately called Kitten, on that classic family show of the fifties "Father Knows Best." Even the title is out of step with our times, isn't it? I am wondering if you know what happened to Lauren Chapin after that series? "When 'Father Knows Best' finished, everything finished," she said. "I couldn't get a job. I had been typecast as Kathy Anderson. The more I didn't work, the

more my mother drank and the more beligerent I became. I started running away from home. I had become an incorrigible child.” What followed was not a very pretty picture. In time she was into drugs. There were casual lovers, fast company, and eight miscarriages, all of which led to welfare, declining health, treatment in a mental hospital and finally prison.

But something happened to Lauren Chapin. In the midst of her wilderness the Prince of Peace came to her and moved her from pandemonium to peace. She said that when she accepted Christ it occurred to her with a sudden clarity that she was an individual, worthy in her own right, who no longer had to live up to the impossible example of Kathy Anderson. “All my life I’ve wanted to be loved,” she said. “God’s love is the most complete love, and I think that is what I was looking for.”³

Something happened in Lauren Chapin’s life that allowed her to take responsibility for her own destiny. It was her experience of God’s love in her life. Here is the key thought for the morning. Responsibility is just what the word implies – it is a response.

It is the ability, first of all, to respond to our situation. In the words of the old cowpoke, “to take whatever hand life may deal us and play it.” Some of us have not been dealt very good hands.

The Jews have an ancient legend of the “Sorrow Tree.” According to this legend, on the day of judgement each person will be allowed to hang all of his unhappiness on a branch of the great tree. Each person then will walk around the tree and examine all of the troubles hanging in the branches. Anyone may freely choose those of someone else. But, as the legend concludes, each person chooses to reclaim his own personal set of sorrows rather than those of others.⁴

It is not possible for us to exchange circumstances even if we wanted to. We must learn to deal with our own situation.

In the second place, we need the ability to respond to our own needs and aspirations. There was a message contained in an ad in the Wall Street Journal that would benefit all of us. It went like this:

“The greatest waste of our natural resources is the number of people who never achieve their potential. Get out of that slow lane. Shift into that fast lane. If you think you can’t, you won’t. If you think you can, there’s a good chance you will. Even making the effort will make you feel like a new person. Reputations are made by searching for things that can’t be done and doing them. Aim low: boring. Aim high: soaring.”

Responsibility – the ability to respond to our situation – the ability to respond to our own needs and aspirations. But more – the ability to respond to the needs of others. Leo Buscaglia has made

America aware of the therapeutic value of hugging. He tells about Doctor Bresler at the UCLA pain clinic. He isn't writing regular prescriptions any more, he's writing a prescription that says, "four hugs a day." People will say the man is crazy. "Oh no," he says, "hug once in the morning, once at lunch, once in the evening and once before bed and you'll get well."

The ability to respond to people. Of course, we have to be careful. Even hugging can be an act of irresponsibility—if there is the intent of debasing or taking advantage of another.

Our own situation—our own needs and aspirations—the needs of others. But most importantly of all—responsibility is our response to God's love as manifested in Jesus Christ. That is why the Ten Commandments and the Great Commandment are relevant to our lives. "We love because He first loved us." We take responsibility for ourselves and others because He took responsibility for us on the cross of Calvary.

In March of 1978 a Colorado man brought a "malparenting suit" against his mother and father. He sued them for \$300,000 for "lousing up his life," claiming they had intentionally done a terrible job of parenting and had made him what he was. The judge dismissed the suit saying there must be a "statute of limitations" on parenting and a time when an adult takes responsibility for his own life. If not, then next will come suits against brothers, sisters, teachers, and even friends.⁵

There are times when all of us would rather escape than to face our responsibility. When Charlie Brown questioned what the world would be like if everyone ran away from their problems like Linus, the little guy concluded that at least they all would be running in the same direction if they were running away from their problems!

But to be human is to be responsible. To be mature emotionally is to be responsible. To be a follower of Jesus Christ is to be responsible. Responsible for our situation, for our destiny, for the welfare of others, and always—in all things—responding to the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

¹ Msgr. Arthur Tonne, Five Minute Homilies on the Gospels (Hillsboro, Kansas: M. B. Publishing House, 1977).

² (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978).

³ Dr. Joe Harding.

⁴ Source Unknown.

⁵ David A. Seamands, Putting Away Childish Things, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1982).

TEACH THEM TO YOUR CHILDREN
Deuteronomy 11: 18-21, 26-28
(Father's Day)

Today we salute our fathers. The role of the father in today's family is not the same as in earlier generations. One young father was asked, "Who is the real boss in your house?"

He hesitated for a moment and answered, "Well, my wife bosses the children. The children boss the dog and cat, but I can say anything I want to the geraniums." Yes, things have changed. One thing that has changed for the better is that many fathers are taking on more responsibility in the nurturing of their children. That is a trend to be applauded--particularly in the light of today's lesson from Deuteronomy: (18-21) (RSV)

"You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul; and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlet between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates, that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land...."

The question for the day is this: **HOW GOOD A JOB ARE YOU DOING TEACHING YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT THE THINGS OF GOD?**

A Sarasota, Florida couple made the newspapers a while back. They earned this publicity by instructing their teenagers on the ins and outs of the family business. The family business happened to be armed robbery. This couple was thoroughly schooling their teenage sons in such tools of the trade as AK-47 assault rifles, police scanners, escape routes, surveillance and survival gear, and disguises. They carefully taught them hand-to-hand combat and were expected to memorize police codes and map layouts. After each robbery the boys were debriefed, and their mistakes were spotted and corrected. (1)

The crazy part is that these parents were far more serious about training their boys for armed robbery than many Christian parents are about teaching their children about life and God. These two misguided parents knew that their children needed very definite guidance if they were to succeed at armed

robbery. They didn't send their boys out unprepared for the things that they faced. They even made sure that the teenagers learned from their previous mistakes. That kind of parental care and instruction by crooked parents should make many Christian parents cringe in shame at their own half-hearted efforts. Thus the question again: How well are you doing at teaching your children about the things of God?

THE RAISING OF CHILDREN IS THE MOST CHALLENGING TASK THAT GOD GIVES TO HUMAN BEINGS. Even very young children can be a handful for their parents. Recently in the news was a 3-year-old boy whose parents turned their back on him at a market in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands for only a second. During that second, however, the child climbed into an unattended delivery van, started the engine, and ran over five market stalls before the van came to a stop. (2)

Sometimes, as comedian Martin Mull has observed, "Having children is like having a bowling alley installed in your brain!" Children have a way of keeping all of us off balance. I read recently about a new salesman who worked door to door selling an encyclopedia for children. He had concluded his presentation to the mother of a five-year-old boy. Although he sensed that he had already convinced her of the value of the books to her son, he went on and used one more of his highly charged sales techniques.

"If the answer to any question your little boy asks can't be found in this encyclopedia, I will refuse to sell these books to you," he said to the mother. Then, turning to the five-year-old, he said, "Ask me a question, sonny. Just ask me anything you want to know, and I'll show your mother where she can find the answer in this wonderful encyclopedia."

The five-year-old thought only a moment before he asked, "What kind of car does God drive?"

That experience was educational for the salesman. He never asked that question again. (3)

A grandmother recently told in Redbook a eye-opening story about her grandson. The boy's aunt was holding seven-year-old Jeremy on her lap. The aunt gave nephew Jeremy a warm hug and said, "Jeremy, how did you get to be such a big boy?"

After a moment, Jeremy looked up at his aunt and politely asked, "Well, do you know about cell division and stuff?" Ask a silly question and get a

silly answer. Children often amaze us with their knowledge. They always keep us off balance. The training of children is one of life's most challenging tasks.

THE TRAINING OF CHILDREN IS ALSO ONE OF SOCIETY'S MOST VITAL TASKS. Our society is slowly waking up to the fact that America could easily lose its preeminence among nations if we do not give a higher priority to education. Internationally, American students ranked no higher than tenth out of twenty industrialized and Third World nations in a 1985 assessment of math achievement. Guess who was number one? Japan.

American students spend 180 days a year in school. Japanese young people, including the half days they put in on Saturday, spend 240. Overall, by the time a Japanese student graduates from high school, he or she has been to school one to three years longer than an American student. As a result, the average Japanese high school graduate has the basic knowledge of the average American college graduate.

The Japanese are so fanatical about education that when a child is sick his mother will often show up at school in his place and take notes for him. (4) That is parental involvement!

Education must be a priority for our society. Education for all our children. There are bright minds in the inner cities of our nation that are going to waste. In today's world, a mind IS a terrible thing to waste.

Motivating children to learn and become, however, is not a simple task. **TWO TRUTHS SEEM ALMOST INCONTROVERTIBLE, THOUGH.**

THE FIRST IS THE IMPORTANCE OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT. Where parents are involved with the education of their children, children usually excel. A child who is a good reader was usually read to in his mother's or father's arms. A child who is excited about school usually has parents who are excited about school. Parental involvement makes a critical difference.

Dr. Charlie Shedd tells of an experience he had on a plane, jetting to Los Angeles. He was seated next to a well-dressed man who was absorbed in an article, graphically illustrated with pictures of teenagers on drugs. When he finished reading, the young man closed the magazine and stared into space. Apparently forgetting those around him, he half-spoke, half-whispered what seemed to be a prayer. "Oh God--I wonder why! I suppose nobody knows."

And then he added quickly, "But if a father can make the difference, I sure want to make the difference!"

Dr. Shedd began to ask this young man questions. He learned that he was a successful businessman who was burdened by the demands of his career. He had a wife and three children, and nothing was higher on his agenda for the years ahead than to be an effective father--a father who would "make the difference."

Parents can make a difference--if they are willing to give the time. Dr. James Dobson tells about a team of researchers who asked fathers to answer the question, "How many hours or minutes do you spend with your one-year-old child?" The average of all the times mentioned by these men was fifteen to twenty minutes a day.

The researchers then attached a microphone to the children of these fathers and taped their entire day for several days. The average time the children actually spent with their fathers was limited to 2.7 encounters daily, lasting ten to fifteen seconds each--practically no time at all. Parental involvement is critical. That is the first thing we need to see.

The second is this: **NO CHILD IS PREPARED FOR LIFE WHO HAS NOT BEEN TAUGHT THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST.** Shortly after the founding of Harvard College in 1636 this statement was issued by its trustees:

"Let every student be plainly instructed, and earnestly pressed to consider well [that the] main end of his life and studies is to know God and Jesus Christ...and therefore to lay Christ...as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning." The fact that Harvard has not lived up to its original vision does not obscure the wisdom of those words. We can have men and women who have impeccable academic credentials, and who live in the finest homes and drive the most expensive cars, who are really empty shells with no real purpose for life. With all of their advantages they still may be persons who live only for themselves and have no concept of their life in relationship to God and others. In fact, this is an apt description of a large segment of our society today.

The greatest need our children have is to learn about the love of Jesus Christ. If they know that love, we won't have to worry that they will be dragged down by temptation and despair later in their lives.

That is why Sunday School and worship are so important, but they are

only a beginning. I believe in Sunday School. I cannot imagine any parent not taking their child's attendance in Sunday School just as seriously as they take attendance in the public schools. Still, even that is not enough. How can one hour a week compensate for all of the other influences in today's society? Parents must also talk to their children about God.

Devoted parents will also talk to their children about their responsibilities to others.

A Newsweek article recently told about a 6-year-old boy from Oklahoma named Brian Parish. According to this article, young Bryan did extra chores for 5 months to get money to buy toys for poor children. He earned \$50 with his extra work and then picked out the toys that were to be bought for the children of a needy family.

Bryan's example impressed the Newsweek editors. Six-year-olds do not naturally give and sacrifice for others. In fact, most people of any age do not naturally tend to do those things. However, Brian's mother encouraged his project and his aunt helped him find a needy family. Therefore, Brian is growing up learning to give. That lesson is a very valuable gift to give a child! (5)

How about your family? What are your children learning about God from you? What are they learning about responsibilities to others. Of course, our actions speak louder than words. But words are needed too. "Teach them to your children," says God in Deuteronomy. We need to do that partially because it is our duty as parents, and partially because we know no child is adequately prepared for life who does not know the love of Jesus Christ.

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1. "Sons Learned Family Business...Crime," The Knoxville News-Sentinel (July 17, 1989), Section A, p. 5.
 2. "Toddler Tries Hand at Driving; 6 People Hurt," The Knoxville News-Sentinel (April 20, 1989), Section A, p. 10.
 3. Gloria Hoffman and Pauline Graivier, SPEAK THE LANGUAGE OF SUCCESS,(New York: Berkley Books, 1983).
 4. Lee Iacocca, TALKING STRAIGHT, (New York: Bantam Books, 1988).
 5. Newsweek (July 10, 1989), p. 502

WHY WE GIVE
Deuteronomy 26:1-11

Preparing a message on the subject 'Why We Give' made me think of a story that Dennis Hensley told on himself.

Working as a chaplain's assistant at the Fort Knox Reception Station, he says that he got used to countless new recruits coming into his office with complaints on adjustments to Army life. During this initial week the recruits had to "donate" a pint of blood. One afternoon a man came storming into his office yelling, "I can't take it! They cut off all my hair, took away my civilian clothes. I mean, what do they want from a guy--blood?"

"Oh, no," Hensley assured him. "That's not until tomorrow." (1)

When you announce a sermon on giving, somewhere there is a silent scream in the congregation: "What do you want from a guy--blood?"

An Indiana pastor had a creative way of approaching this subject. He told his congregation, "As you know, our budget has increased eighteen percent this year. Let me suggest that all of you consider giving one-tenth of your income. Your church is in real financial need. Quite frankly, it is fit to be tithed." (2)

Another pastor also had a creative idea. His church was instituting a unified budget. One budget would replace several smaller budgets. It took him a long time to determine the best way to present this. Finally he told the congregation that the new unified budget was their effort to "put all their begs into one ask it."

Then there is the story of a minister in a small town who was having trouble with his collections. So one Sunday he announced from the pulpit: "Before we pass the collection plate, I would like to request that the person who stole the chickens from Brother Smith's henhouse please refrain from giving any money to the Lord. The Lord doesn't want money from a thief."

The collection plate was passed around, and for the first time in many months, everybody put something in.

This morning we want to talk about Why We Give. This is not a special appeal for funds. Neither do I want to heap guilt on anyone who is not giving as he or she should. That is between you and the Lord. It is simply that we are beginning Lent and the Old Testament Lesson for the first Sunday in Lent is on this important theme of giving. And it is an important theme. Giving is at the heart of our faith. "God so loved the world that He gave..." He calls us to do likewise. Let's consider for a moments our text from Deuteronomy and the reasons why we give.

Deuteronomy is basically Moses' farewell address to the Hebrew people. It is a book of law, given by God, to guide the people as they seek to build a nation in the yet to be settled, Promised Land. Moses instructs them that when they come into the Promised Land and settle it and farm it, they are to take a portion of the first harvest and bring it to the priest. The priest is to take the offering and place it upon the altar of God. Then the person who is bringing the offering is to perform a kind of ritual before the Lord. He is to say something to this effect: "A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt where he became a great nation. But there he fell under evil taskmasters. The Lord heard the cry of his people, however, and brought them out of Egypt and gave them this land flowing with milk and honey. Now I bring the first-fruits of the ground which You, Oh Lord, have given me."

That was the rite and ritual for the first tithe offering. If you or I could have been one of the Hebrew children still on the march through the wilderness when Moses gave this command, we would understand what a bold statement of faith this prescribed ritual was. At that particular moment the people of Israel had nothing. A day was coming, however, when they would inhabit a land flowing with milk and honey. When that day came, they were to bring a tithe of their harvest and dedicate it to God. This rite was a promise as well as a prescription.

If I said to you that next year God will bless you with a million dollars, but that in turn he would require you to bring 10% to the altar, you would cheerfully sign up, would you not? Can you imagine how readily most of the world's people would nod in assent if I said that next year THEY will make what YOU make, but 10% must be returned to the Lord? They would see that as a tremendous bargain. They would indeed be cheerful givers.

One church had on its bulletin board this sign: "The Lord loveth a cheerful giver. He also accepteth from a grinch." If we properly understood why we give, we would be cheerful givers. We would understand what a privilege it is to give. And we would anticipate the day when we will be able to give even more.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, WE GIVE IN RESPONSE TO ALL THAT THE LORD HAS DONE FOR US. A lady wrote into CATHOLIC DIGEST to tell about an experience she had with her four-year-old daughter. The mother, a devout Roman Catholic, had been praying the Rosary each evening after she finished the supper dishes. After watching a few times, her four-year-old daughter asked if she

could pray with her. So the mother explained to her that she would say the first part of the prayer and the little girl could finish it. Since the child did not know the prayers, her mother recited them with her a few times until the little girl said, "I can do it now."

Her mother began, and when she had prayed the first half of the GLORIA PATRI, (Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost) she waited for the little girl to finish with, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be." Instead, the little girl devoutly answered, "It's better now than it was before!"
(3)

Many of us can say "Amen!" to that little girl's simple prayer. Things ARE better for us than they have ever been before. Not for all of us, to be sure. But still, most of us, when we balance up our lives have much for which to be thankful.

Some years ago, Dr. Edson, the rector of St. Anne's Episcopal Church in Lowell, Massachusetts, used to walk through the town, greeting everyone with a cheerful "Good morning, and how are you today?" One morning, he was surprised to hear someone respond, "I'm very well, thank God!" Edson brightened and replied, "I am so delighted to hear you thank God for it! For 20 years I have heard everyone in Lowell thanking me. They always say, 'I am very well, thank you, Dr. Edson.' It's nice to hear someone thanking God."

Do you have your health? Do you have people who love you? Do you have food to eat and a warm place to sleep on a cold winter night? Do you know that Jesus Christ died for your sins? We have much to be thankful for. We give, first of all in response to all that God has done for us.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, WE GIVE AS A REMEDY TO THE ENSLAVING POWER OF WEALTH. This is the famous "eagle on the frozen limb" principle. I'm sure you know the story.

A hunter once observed an eagle alighting on an ice-crusting limb floating in a river rushing down toward a waterfall. At any moment, the eagle could have turned loose of that icy perch and soared into the blue sky. But it did not turn loose. It remained too long, so that the eagle's talons froze onto the limb and it could not let go. At first the eagle had the limb, but now the limb had the eagle, and it perished.

There is a point in our drive for a better life when we are forced to make a decision about the role of money in our lives--whether we have it or it has us.

Did you see the latest survey in USA TODAY that indicates that the more people earn, the less they give proportionally to help others? It should work the

other way, shouldn't it? The more you earn, the more discretionary income you have; therefore, the more you should be able to give. But that's not the way it works. Surveys show that people with incomes below \$10,000 give three times more proportionally to charities than people with incomes \$50,000--\$100,000, and people with incomes below \$50,000 give almost twice as much proportionally as people in the \$100,000 to \$200,000 category. Why? We all know why. The eagle once had the limb but now the limb has the eagle.

R. C. Sproul in his book, *OBJECTIONS ANSWERED*, tells about a young Jewish boy growing up in Germany many years ago who had a profound sense of admiration for his father. The life of the family revolved around the religious practices of their faith. His father led them to the synagogue faithfully.

In his teen years, however, the boy's family was forced to move to another town in Germany. This town had no synagogue, only a Lutheran church. The life of the community revolved around the Lutheran church and all the best people belonged to it. Suddenly the father announced to the family that they were all going to abandon their Jewish traditions and join the Lutheran church. When the stunned family asked "why" the father explained that it would be good for his business. The youngster was bewildered and confused. His deep disappointment soon gave way to anger and a kind of intense bitterness that plagued him throughout his life.

Later he left Germany and went to England to study. He sat daily at the British Museum formulating his ideas and composing a book. In that book he introduced a whole new world view and conceived of a movement that was designed to change the world. In the book he described religion as the "opiate for the masses." He committed the people who followed him to life without God. His ideas became the norm for the governments of almost half of the world's people. His name? Karl Marx, founder of the Communist movement. The history of the twentieth century and perhaps beyond was severely affected because one father let his values become distorted. Money became his god. He held on to the limb too long. Now the limb--his money--had him.

Please pray about this with regard to your own family. It is happening to far too many of us. The "greed is good" syndrome has seeped down into our society until many who used to worship Yahweh now worship Mammon. It is happening all around us.

I like the story about the wealthy television evangelist who was dying in his mansion, and his flock gathered round to ask him for his last wish. "Before I die," he said, "I would like to take a ride." And they asked the wealthy evangelist what he required for that final ride before entering the kingdom of heaven. And he said, "I would like a very small camel and a very large needle." (4)

It is happening to people everywhere. None of us is immune. Giving is a RESPONSE to the goodness of God and it is a REMEDY to the enslaving power of wealth.

FINALLY, GIVING IS A REMINDER OF WHO IS NUMBER ONE IN OUR LIVES. According to Deuteronomy 14:23b the whole purpose of tithing is to teach us to always put God first in our lives. Chances are that the person who does not tithe does not put God first in the other areas of his or her life as well. It is a matter of priorities. It is a matter of "seeking first the Kingdom of God" and trusting that He will provide you with all you need for an abundant life.

This is the secret of great living. This is the secret of deep happiness and contentment. Noted writer Cleveland Amory long ago learned this secret. He says, "You can give of your talent, you can give of your possessions, or you can give of yourself. For God's sake, give something." He has learned that giving is happiness.

Are you experiencing that happiness in your life right now? We give. Why? In response to all that God has given us. To remedy the enslaving power of our wealth. As a reminder of Who is number one in our lives.

You can give of your your talent, you can give of your possessions, or you can give of yourself. For God's sake--and your own--give something.

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1. THE INSPIRATIONAL WRITER
 2. Herm Albright in QUOTE
 3. Ruth Baldwin in CATHOLIC DIGEST
 4. SERMONS ILLUSTRATED

Sixth Sunday After Epiphany

WHY CHOOSE DEATH WHEN YOU CAN CHOOSE LIFE?

Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

The ability to make concise and accurate decisions is one of the great secrets of successful living. Those of you who are sports fans will appreciate the story of a college football team whose starting quarterback was injured. The number two quarterback had not even dressed out due to an illness. This left only a freshman quarterback who also did their punting but had absolutely no game experience as a college quarterback. The coach had to throw him into the fray, however. It was first down, but the ball was resting on their own three yard line. The coach's main thought was to get them away from the goal line so they would have room to punt out of danger.

The coach said, "Son, I want you to hand-off to Jones, our big fullback for the next two plays, let him run into the middle of the line and get us a few yards. Then I want you to punt." The young quarterback did as he was instructed. On the first play he handed off to Jones, but almost miraculously Jones found a hole off tackle and ran fifty yards. The young quarterback called the same play again and once more, miracle of miracles, the hole was there again. This time Jones ran forty five yards. The fans were going crazy. The ball was on the opponents' two yard line--six short feet from the goal line. Confidently the team lined up quickly and the young quarterback received the snap, stepped back and punted the football into the stands. As the team came off the field, the coach angrily grabbed the young quarterback and asked, "What in the world were you thinking about when you called that last play?" The quarterback answered blankly, "I was thinking what a dumb coach we have."

The truth of the matter is that many coaches today do not want their quarterbacks making decisions. I understand that not a single quarterback in professional football today calls his own plays. They are all sent in from the bench. Now obviously we are not here this morning to talk football. But there is an important point here we need to see about our relationship with God. God has paid us the ultimate compliment. He allows us to make our own decisions. He allows us to call our own plays. When he created us in his own image, this was primary among the characteristics with which he endowed us--the ability to choose. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed to sustain their life. But in the middle of the garden he planted a tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The moment he did that,

he provided them with an opportunity to make a choice. They could heed his instructions and live forever in paradise or they could eat of the forbidden fruit and die.

What an absurd choice, you say. Who would ever choose death over life? Yet people make that choice all the time. Every young person in this room is aware of the physical harm that can come from smoking cigarettes. The link between tobacco and lung cancer as well as heart disease, high blood pressure and a host of other diseases is almost indisputable. Why would anyone ever choose to begin to smoke? Why choose death when you can choose life? Yet millions of teenagers this year will choose to begin smoking.

There is not a person in this room who is not aware of the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse, yet there are people within the sound of my voice, who would rather listen to the serpent saying, "Why that won't happen to you" than to listen to the voice of reason or of God. Unfortunately, it is not only ourselves whom we sometimes hurt through the misuse of our freedom. There are people who really do treasure their marriages. But they are morally weak. They would not want to hurt their spouse for anything in the world, yet they are playing with fire--choosing, perhaps, the death of a very precious marriage relationship because of their weakness. Many more examples could be used. Who in the world would choose death over life? Yet millions of people do it every day.

That was as true three thousand years ago as it is today. It was with great urgency then that Moses called the people of Israel together and issued this earnest plea: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you that today I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Oh, but that you would choose life. . ." (Living Bible)

ONE OF THE KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL CHRISTIAN LIVING IS THE REALIZATION THAT GOD HAS GIVEN US THE FREEDOM TO CHOOSE OUR OWN DESTINIES. A social worker in San Jose, California tells of knocking at the door of a pitiful house. A woman opened the door a crack, put her foot against it and said through the opening: "You needn't come in here. Me and my husband don't take no interest in nothin'." What a pitiful description of persons who have given up control of their lives.

William Willimon tells of seeing a movie years ago in which one of the leading players lived a tragic life, careening from one disaster to the next, never able to hold a job or support a family or keep friends. He finally dies in a tavern brawl. At his death, one of the men who had tried in vain to befriend him and help him get his life in order says, "Joe died almost like he was born. He came in this world kicking and screaming

and fighting and understanding nothin!' And he went out of this world fighting without the slightest notion of what he was put here for or where he was goin'." ¹ A pitiful record of another life out of control.

God has given us the ability to take control of our own lives. We can choose our own destinies. Every study of great leaders has emphasized their decisiveness. They know where they are going, and they make the necessary decisions in order to get there. A recent cartoon in the newspapers says it well. BERRY'S WORLD shows a picture of a down-and-out vagrant sitting on a sidewalk. Beside him is a large sign that reads, "Keeping my options open, Thank you." It would be nice to go through life always with our options open, but somewhere we have to make some choices.

You may remember Uncle Remus' delightful story about Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit was invited to dinner on the same evening at the same hour at Brer Terrapin's and Brer Possum's. There he stood hungrily at the crossroads. . . "Do I eat with Brer Terrapin or do I eat with Brer Possum?" First he ran down the road toward Brer Possum's. Then, changing his mind, he reversed himself and started towards Brer Terrapin's. Then he changed his mind again and started towards Brer Possum's. With the thought of two meals awaiting him, he ran back and forth, unable to make a decision until finally he missed dinner at both places. There are many persons who live their lives like Brer Rabbit. There is no firm destination for their lives, no vital commitment, no beckoning call. In the words of Elijah, "How long will you limp between two opinions?" (I Kings 18:21) Or in the words of Joshua: "If you be unwilling to serve Jehovah, Choose ye this day whom ye will serve. . ." One of the keys to successful living is the realization that God has given us the freedom to choose our own destinies.

This brings us to the second point. WE HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR DECISIONS.

You may know the story of a social worker who took real interest in a young boy with severe birth defects. She arranged for financial and medical help. Surgeons were brought in to restore facial features. Therapists taught the young fellow to speak and to walk. By his teens he was able to function as a normal young man in all the activities of his peers. Where do you think that young man ended up? Unfortunately, he ended up in prison, serving a life sentence for murder. As the social worker explained it, "We taught him how to walk, but not where to walk. . ." The social worker and the surgeons could open up a new world of opportunity for that young man, but they could not protect him from the consequences of his misdeeds.

So it is with each of us. If we abuse the freedom we have, we pay the price. I like the story of a man who had been caught driving 40 miles per hour in a school zone. He was fined \$100. The clerk offered him a receipt when he paid his fine. "Why would I want a receipt for a traffic violation?" the man growled. "Oh, the clerk replied, "with four of these you get a bicycle to ride."

So many of the trials and tribulations of life are the result of bad decisions, unworthy actions, dishonest motives and means. And there is a price to be paid. A young boy was quite disobedient. His father wanted to impress upon him the seriousness of his disobedience. Each time the boy did something that was wrong, his father had him drive a nail into a post. Each day that he did well, however, he was allowed to remove a nail from the post. As he grew older, the boy's good days exceeded his bad and soon the post had no more nails in it. However, the young man noticed one day that the holes in the post were still there where the nails had been. The deeds had been forgotten, but the scars remained. God forgives us for our misdeeds, but God does not suspend the law of consequences. What we sow, we reap. We have the freedom to choose, but with that freedom goes the responsibility to choose life and not death.

This brings us to the final thing to be said. **THERE IS ONE CHOICE THAT SUPERCEDES ALL OTHERS.** When Moses instructed the children of Israel to choose life, he was impressing upon them that they should obey the commandments of God. To obey the commandments was life. You and I have discovered something even more vital than the commandments. **WE HAVE DISCOVERED THE CHRIST.** "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life . . ." said Jesus. (John 14: 6)

To choose Jesus is to choose life! Don Bramlett knows that. Don is a big, burly football star at Carson–Newman College in Jefferson City, Tennessee. Bramlett's father was a study in undisciplined living. He was also a star athlete. John Bramlett was once known as the "Meanest Man" in the National Football League. A free agent who became a starting linebacker for the Denver Broncos in 1965, Bramlett was runner-up to Joe Namath for rookie of the year honors. He played in two Pro Bowls and in 1970 was voted Most Valuable Player for the New England Patriots. Off the field, however, his life was a mess. His family never knew when he left home whether he would come home drunk, or call from a jail, or not even come home at all, because he was often involved in fights in bars. One day some visitors came by the Bramlett home. They wanted to talk to John Bramlett about Christ. The impact of that visit

changed John Bramlett's life forever. Suddenly he turned from pursuing death to pursuing life. That is what repentance is. It is the exercise of our freedom to decide, by God's grace, for those things that are of eternal value. John Bramlett made that choice. Today his life is a living testimony to the change Christ can make in the life of a believer.

Perhaps, Bramlett's greatest testimony, however, is his son Don. Don still has a Christmas letter that he penned in an elementary school classroom many years ago. The subject was "All I Want For Christmas Is . . ." Here is what young Don Bramlett wrote:

"All I want for Christmas is for my family and me to have a very Merry Christmas like the other two Christmases we've had. My dad was out drinking and fighting three years ago and we were all worrying about him and wondering when he would come back.

"While opening our presents, we were so miserable through those years. Now we have a happy and merry Christmas after my daddy accepted Jesus in his heart and we have a lot to be thankful for. This is all I want for Christmas and I've got it."

Don Bramlett got all he wanted for Christmas. His daddy was a changed man. "I have set before you life and death," said Moses. "Oh, but that you would choose life." Don Bramlett is not the only person to ever offer a Christmas wish on behalf of a father, or a spouse, or a young person. It is an urgent plea that comes straight from the heart of God. Choose life! Choose Christ!

¹Horace R. Weaver, Editor, The International Lesson Annual, 1984-85 (Nashville: Abington Press, 1984).

²The Knoxville News-Sentinel, Friday, December 5, 1986.

AN INVITATION TO KNOW GOD

I Samuel 3: 1-10

Mark Twain is a name known to almost every American. A writer of great charm and wit, Twain could communicate important insights in a way that won him many admirers. He was welcome in the highest social and literary circles both in this country and abroad.

On one of his trips abroad the Emperor of Germany sent an invitation for him to come to the palace to dine with the royal family. When Twain's little daughter heard about it, she exclaimed, "Daddy, you know most everybody in the whole world now, don't you, except God?"

Out of the mouth of babes . . . Our Old Testament lesson today contains an invitation for us to know God. But first let's form the backdrop for the little drama that we are going to survey.

There was a certain man named Elkanah who had two wives. That makes for an interesting story from the beginning. The wives were named Hannah and Peninah. Peninah had children but Hannah had none. That was cause for much friction between them. In those days when women were valued primarily for their fertility, a barren wife was considered a liability. Cattiness is not restricted to the female gender, but Peninah never let Hannah forget that she had given Elkanah several children while Hannah had given him none.

Hannah wept and refused to eat, her despair was so great. Elkanah tried to comfort her. He sought to reassure her by affirming his love for her, but he could not fill that sense of emptiness and failure that Hannah felt. Hannah was a deeply religious woman, so it was only natural that she should take her despair to the Lord. It was at the temple of Shiloh that she knelt to pray.

Eli the prophet was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple. He saw this woman weeping bitterly. Her lips were moving but her voice could not be heard. Eli came over to where she was and scolded her. He had wrongly concluded that she was intoxicated. He could not know the anguish in Hannah's heart--unspeakable sorrow we might say. She had been making a promise to God that day that if he would give her a son then she would "give him to the Lord all the days of his life." Other mothers have made such promises, but few with the sincerity of Hannah. She explains her situation to Eli and he grants her his blessing, "Go in peace," he says, "and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to him."

Thus it was that young Samuel came into the world as an answer to a devout woman's prayer. He was only three years old when his mother brought him to the temple and left him with the prophet

Eli to raise as his own son in the sacred shrine at Shiloh. Once a year Hannah would go to see her son and bring him a little robe that she had sewn with much love and devotion. By the way, after that first hurdle was cleared, Hannah had several other children. You've seen that happen, haven't you? But her firstborn she gave to God.

There is much more to the story than this. You will want to read for yourself about the corrupt sons of Eli, for they are an important part of the story as well. But I wanted to refresh your memory--to properly set the scene--concerning this critical evening in Samuel's life when he first came to know the Lord.

Can you remember that moment in your own life? For some of us, it occurred as a child or as a young teen. It may have been in church or on a youth outing--around a campfire or on a mountaintop. But God spoke to us and we knew he was real.

Samuel was still a boy. He was lying down in his little cubicle in the temple. The lamp of God, as it was called, had not yet gone out. The ark of the covenant was nearby. Suddenly Samuel heard a voice, "Samuel! Samuel!" and Samuel answered, "Here I am," and he ran to Eli and he said, "I am here." But Eli had not called him and sent him back to his bed. "Probably something has frightened him," Eli thought to himself with a smile as he closed his eyes.

Samuel lay down again in his bed, but a second time the voice called, "Samuel." Again he rushed to Eli's bed. Again Eli sends him back. The writer of the book of Samuel adds at this point, "Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord . . ." What a remarkable thing is getting ready to happen in Samuel's life! It is that remarkable experience to which you and I are invited this morning.

A third time Samuel hears the voice and a third time he runs to Eli, but this time Eli perceives it is the voice of the Lord speaking to Samuel. "Go lie down," he advises his young ward. "If he calls you again, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down as he was instructed. And the voice of the Lord came once more, "Samuel! Samuel!" With heart racing and body rigid with fear, Samuel answers, "Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears." And God does speak--words that will forever change Samuel's life.

I hope you came to this sacred place today with the intention that you might hear God speak to your life. Why did you come? Out of habit? Out of loyalty? Out of guilt? I am thankful you are here whatever the motivation. But I hope that you came with an expectancy that this could be a life-changing

experience for you. That sometimes happens in worship. People who have been blind are made to see. People who are in darkness see a light. People who have known nothing but defeat suddenly achieve a great victory. By God's grace they conquer themselves. It can happen.

But three things must be present for us to come to know God in the same way that Samuel did. We must have, first of all, A BELIEVING HEART. The theologians talk about a "leap of faith." I don't believe it is that hard at all for us to believe in God, for us to trust in his promises, for us to see life through the eyes of faith.

Certainly life can make us cynical. Jesus knew that it was easier for little children to experience the kingdom than for us shell-shocked adults. Our lives have become encrusted with layers of negative experiences, self-serving rationalizations, unrealized expectations. The boy Samuel was at a stage in life when he was more open to God's leading than perhaps he would be later in life. Obviously that truth has a lot to say about the importance of our ministries to children and youth in our church.

But none of us are too old to believe. Faith still is simply a matter of letting go and letting God.

A man descended into a deep well by sliding down a rope which was supposed to be of ample length. But to his dismay he came to the end of it before his feet had touched the bottom. He didn't have the strength to climb up again, and to let go and drop seemed to him but to be dashed to pieces in the depths below. He held on until his strength was utterly exhausted, and then dropped, as he thought, to his death. He fell--just three inches--and found himself safe on the rock bottom.

Some of us are just three inches from trusting God, but we are using all of that energy clinging to our doubts and fears.

Before we can hear God speak to our lives--before we can know him as our closest friend and dearest companion--before he can become real to us, as real as he was to young Samuel, we must have a heart of faith.

As Harry Emerson Fosdick once put it, "He who cannot let go, cannot hang on . . ." He pointed out that we must remember there are two aspects to every strong life: fruitage and rootage, activity and receptivity, tension and relaxation, working hard and resting back.

A believing heart--that is the first step if we would know God. Here is the second--A LISTENING EAR. If it is true, as the old saying goes, that the walls sometimes have ears, it is also true that sometimes the ears have walls.

Eli advised young Samuel to lie down and listen. The story is told of a young man in the great depression who saw a "help wanted" ad in the newspaper for a telegraph operator. He had studied Morse Code at home while he was unemployed. Still he had no experience and his heart sank as he joined a roomful of other men seeking the same job.

He found a chair and with a feeling of dejection sunk into it. After only a few minutes, however, his face suddenly brightened up, he jumped up out of his chair, and he burst into the manager's office. Within a few minutes the manager appeared at the door to announce that the job had been filled.

One of the other men who had been waiting asked with great astonishment, "What did he say that landed him the job? After all he was the last one here." The manager answered warmly, "It was nothing he said. All morning long I have been tapping out a message on my office window in Morse Code. It was loud enough for all of you to hear. The message was this: 'If you can understand this message, come on in. You're hired.' All of you heard the noise. He was the only one who listened."

It must be very frustrating to God to seek to speak to some of us who simply will not listen. Since you got up this morning and made your way down to this house of worship, God has been trying to speak to you. Through the beauty of creation, through the love of family members, through the hymns we sing, the Scripture we read, in a hundred different ways, God is trying to speak. But only a few of us will really hear.

A believing heart--listening ears--and finally, we need OBEDIENT HANDS. "Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears." Please note those two words, "thy servant." I suppose that the reason many of us refuse to give in to the impulse of faith, the reason many of us fail to tune in to God's voice, is that such steps as those might lead to one more step--a commitment of our lives to his service. And it is true. But what else in life is as meaningful or rewarding as a walk with the Master? What else in life can give us as much genuine happiness as serving him and the world for which Christ died?

I have never know a person who genuinely committed his or her life to God who was ever sorry. Chuck Swindoll has a humorous story in his book, Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life (Portland, Oregon: Multnomah Press, 1983) that illustrates this. A missionary was sitting at her second-story window when she was handed a letter from home. As she opened the letter, a crisp, new, ten-dollar bill fell out. She was pleasantly surprised, but as she read the letter her eyes were distracted by the movement of a shabbily dressed stranger down below, leaning against a post in front of the building. She

couldn't get him off her mind. Thinking that he might be in greater financial distress than she, she slipped the bill into an envelope on which she quickly penned the words, "Don't despair." She threw it out the window. The stranger below picked it up, read it, looked up, and smiled as he tipped his hat and went his way.

The next day she was about to leave the house when a knock came at the door. She found the same shabbily dressed man smiling as he handed her a roll of bills. When she asked what they were for, he replied: "That's the sixty bucks you won, lady. Don't Despair paid five to one."

I like that. Obviously an act of love, an act of service, and act of commitment doesn't always have a five-to-one payoff. Sometimes it is much more.

Samuel had a heart of faith. He had a listening ear and obedient hands. He became one of the greatest of the Old Testament prophets. He knew God in a way few men and women will ever know him. But the same option is open to us. We don't have to dangle helplessly three inches from the ground. God is speaking to our lives. We can know him. Believe, listen, obey. Those are the simple steps of faith that lead to a lifetime of partnership with him.