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Psalm 37: 1-11

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FAITH AND OUR FRETFULNESS

"Fret not thyself because of
evil doers."

-Psalm 37:1

Why should a man be good? No doubt everyone of us has asked himself that question many times. Children ask it. The usual answer for them of course is that if they are not good they get punished. The wise parent, however, tries to help his child find some deeper and more satisfying reason for good behavior than the fear of reprisal.

When we adults ask the same question we often give ourselves the same answer in more subtle form. "Why should I be good? Because if I'm not good, public opinion may turn against me. My friends and relatives will think less of me. My position in society may be threatened."

There are some men and women who no doubt are blackmailed into being good by a fundamentalist interpretation of the Bible which threatens them with dire consequences, even eternal punishment in a physical hell, if they do not obey the admonitions and precepts of a particular religious group.

But no matter who we may be and how exemplary or how atrocious our conduct is, we are nevertheless compelled on occasion to ask why we should adhere to a certain prescribed standard of life and morals which religion calls good. It is perhaps particularly relevant today when all around us the old standards and ideals are being eroded, and people are finding new excuses for behaving as they very well please. If no other excuse can be found, they will explain their indifference to moral restraint as a fear of developing neuroses or psychoses, for surely everyone knows that if one does not express himself (and there is unfortunately little effort to distinguish between the various selves one ought to express), he is very likely to get sick, sick, sick.

But the old restraints are down. Man does have a new moral freedom along with his relatively new religious and political freedom. He will, therefore, find himself asking more and more why he should adhere to traditional standards of goodness. Especially will he be so concerned if he finds that others who do not so adhere seem to be thriving and prospering while living by completely different standards. It irks us to see others prosper and to feel that we could prosper too save for our moral principles. When we feel this way, however, we are but echoing the cries that must have been uttered by certain Jews well over 2,000 years ago, and which caused the Psalmist to insist: "Fret not thyself because of evil doers."

II

The reason many of the old standards are being ignored and the old values rejected is that much of the time they have been right standards held for the wrong reasons. The fact that men have clung to certain values for centuries does give to those values a certain creditability. They have been found through the years to

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work pretty well and to produce good results, but with the passage of time men tend to forget past experience and in a desire to possess more and more freedom and be the victims of less and less restraint, they ignore history and slough off that which they feel is restraining them and repressing the fullest expression of all their desires and impulses.

If Christians are going to have a firm set of values intelligently adhered to, those values must be part of a total philosophy of life and not held in isolation. They must be part of a philosophy which looks beyond the self and beyond this life, which is to say that part of the reason why the old values are being ignored is that the philosophy out of which they were born is being rejected and ignored. The first few centuries of Christianity saw men and women who were absolutely convinced that life was eternal and existed beyond the grave. They were also absolutely convinced concerning the existence of God and his activity in history. With the passage of time and the vast changes that have taken place in civilization, those deep convictions are no longer as widely or as deeply held. Multitudes of men no longer have a strong Christian philosophy of life and therefore do not cling to the religious values and principles which grew out of that philosophy.

And so today men look at others around them who are not practicing the Christian way and they see these people prospering, enjoying the rich fruits of a materialistic culture, and so often they envy them. They ask, "Why should I be good and deprive myself of some of the things that I could have had if I did not cling to these values and principles which have been a part of my traditional religious heritage? Why should I love God whom I have never seen? Why should I prepare myself for an eternal existence which may end up being a false hope? Why not live to the full in the here and now?"

Well, when we think like that we are thinking precisely as did those Jews in the days of King David, and David came back at them with these words, "Fret not thyself because of the evil doers," which translated into modern terms means, "Do not let the actions of those who are evil and selfish persuade you that you ought to become like them." The word fret is not a very common word today, but has a very significant meaning. If you check it in the dictionary, you will discover that it means to eat away, to devour, to consume. That is precisely what happens to us when we look at people who have a different standard of values and begin to envy them. Our envy and our jealousy eats away at us, devours our capabilities and our potentialities, and in the end destroys us. "Fret not thyself because of evil doers."

III

May I suggest to you this morning that the proper therapy and antidote for this kind of fretfulness, this doubt and uncertainty, this jealousy and envy, is the principle of love. The word good comes, obviously, from the same root as the word God. To be good is to be Godlike. Christians believe that the essential nature of God is love. Therefore, to be Godlike is to be motivated by love. Let me illustrate how love works by a simple story taken from a book on psychiatry. It concerns a boy whose parents wanted him to be a good boy, but somehow or other did not know how to keep him from being an exceedingly bad boy. He was kept after school, his allowance was stopped, he was confined to his room, he was denied

things he liked best, and finally he was spanked, but he remained a problem child. He seemed to be hardened against anything that might be done to make him see the light. But he had a beloved pet, a little dog. One afternoon he was trying to teach the dog a trick. It was hot and the boy and the dog were tired. The dog could not understand, and the little boy suddenly in his anger reached out and kicked the dog in the mouth. The dog began to bleed. He looked at the boy with his big brown eyes, puzzled and bewildered. Then slowly walking over to the boy, he stood on his hind legs, put his paw on the little boy's arm, and tried to lick his cheek. The boy broke down. Blinded with tears, he ran to his mother and sobbing said to her, "I've done an awful thing! I've done an awful thing!" Love had convinced that little boy that there were some things that were right and some things that were wrong and would always be so. It was the beginning of a whole new way of life for him. It was the beginning of the construction of a new set of values for his life.

How difficult it is to get young people to see and to understand this principle of love. Oh, yes, they understand what it means to be emotionally attached to someone. They have their strong loyalties and their idealism, but they are just not experienced enough to know what it means really to love. And so they get angry at their parents. They attribute ulterior motives to their parents. They cannot understand that what their parents are doing and saying to them springs out of their parents' deep and abiding love for them. They do not see, or will not see, that if the parents did not love them with this great and abiding love, the parents would not care what they did. It is only because they love that they care. It is because they love that they want their children to abide by those principles which they have come to understand are eternally valid and right and good. And they understand that their children are fretful because of the actions of others around them that are different, that look glamorous and exciting, but so often lead to pain and to death.

The experience of the human race has certainly taught us that there is a consequence for every action, and that every way of life has its particular reward. There are certain ways that manage to shut off one from God, and the person who follows in that way will one day discover it to be the worst consequence that can befall a man. Meantime, the righteous man is developing a companionship with God, and day by day discovering that that is his securest heaven.

I return again to the principle of love. There is something built into the very fabric of man that makes him respond to deep and abiding love. We look at the life of Christ and we see his love and we intuitively know that his way of life is ultimately right.

The other day I reread a poem in my collection that reminded me of how basic this principle of love really is. Hear these words of Eva Mae Gehres:

"I didn't know until today
That you were beautiful.
When you laughed with me
And I knew that you were hiding pain,
I learned how brave you were.
And I looked close to see
Just how a brave man looked --
I saw laughter in your eyes,
But something deeper, too.

And I wondered,
Knowing just how life
Had dealt you storms and pain,
How you could stay serene and sweet.
My friend -- I loved you then
More than I have ever loved before,
And more than I can ever love again."

When we see these qualities of perseverance, understanding, patience, expressing themselves in a beautiful life, we know that these qualities are of God and therefore good. We no longer fret because others who practice a different way of life seem to be having more success, seem to be reaping greater benefits, seem to have the world smile on them. We have come to the deep understanding that God smiles on those who live by the law of love.

As a matter of fact, those who seek after the righteousness of God and live by these principles and values we have been talking about this morning -- these people do prosper, but they prosper in a way which the unrighteous cannot understand. They gain a sense of serenity and peace and the knowledge that they are working with God -- a conviction that they are in his hands and he cares about them. They have a strength and security which can come to men in no other way. They know that God has for them a will and it matters not whether they are victorious in the fight, or whether they reap all the rewards that the world smiles upon, for they know that God can never finally lose.

"My orders are to fight,
Then if I bleed or fail
Or strongly win, what matters it?
Only God doth prevail.

Thy servant craveth not
Except to serve with might.
I was not told to win or lose;
My orders are to fight."

Fight the good fight, finish the course, keep the faith: The rest is in the hands of God.