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Philippians 4:4-9
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SEEK THE BEST THINGS

"Fix your mind on the things which are holy, and right,
and pure, and beautiful, and good."

Philippians 4:9

Fifty-one young people, fifteen years of age, are confirming their faith as Christians and joining the church this morning. They have had about 25 hours of instruction in everything from the Bible to church architecture, from history and theology to church organization and polity. They are still far from being experts on Christianity, but I dare say they have as great a factual knowledge as most of their parents. I would also venture to say that they have an equal sincerity and devotion to the principles of our religion and the Congregational Way.

They are, no doubt, quite happy that this part of their ecclesiastical and theological education is ended. They are not alone, however--I too like my Saturday mornings off. Yet, I am happy for once again having had this experience. I am sorry all of you can't have it. Perhaps some of you might think you know these young people too well already, but my experience is that the better I get to know them, the more I like and appreciate them. They are indeed a queer mixture of the good and the not-so-good, but aren't we all?

I recall an old man out on an evening walk coming upon a couple of high school boys sitting in the park watching a rosy glow in the sky. "Well," beamed the old man, "It is nice to know that there are a few members of the younger generation who can find time to sit quietly and enjoy the natural beauty of a glorious sunset." "It's a beauty all right," replied one of the boys, "but it's not the sunset--the high school's on fire."

These young people do think, they do meditate, they do reflect on the beauty and the goodness, the ugliness and the evil, of the world in which they live. They are indeed a mixture of the good and the not-so-good. They are idealistic, enthusiastic, hopeful. They are, however, not yet mature and experienced. They sometimes get into difficulties like that small boy who interrupted his father's newspaper reading to say, "Pop, I'm supposed to tell you there's going to be a small P.T.A. meeting tomorrow night." "Well, if it's just a small one, do I have to go?" asked the father. "Oh, yes," said the boy. "As a matter of fact, it's just for you, me and the principal!"

But, if there are some things wrong with these young people, then the blame is not all, nor primarily, theirs. The blame is ours; we parents who gave them a poor environment, who offered them poor examples, who failed to guide, and direct and correct them in the years they were silently growing into adulthood. If they are spoiled, we spoiled them.

Did you hear about that Texan who was having dinner with a friend up north. "Someday when you are in Texas," he drawled, "you must see my son's ranch. He's only sixteen, but he's got a magnificent spread and he earned every bit of it himself." "How could a 16-year-old manage to get such a big ranch?" asked the northerner. "By hustling," replied the Texan. "He got two A's and a B on his report card!"

These young people may indeed be spoiled, because all of us in this generation are spoiled. But there's hope for them because they are idealistic, and enthusiastic and expectant.

II

Now the rest of my remarks are addressed primarily to the young and I want to introduce what I have to say with two stories I heard sometime ago. The first is about a custodian in a big city church. Everybody liked him and he got along beautifully with everyone. Someone once asked him how he got along so well with so many people. He replied, "Well, it's not difficult. I just throw my mind into neutral and go where I'm pushed."

The second story has to do with a newspaper woman. She was assigned to stop men on the street and ask them whether they wore pajamas or night shirts.

Both of these stories typify lots of people in our society today--people who do not think, people who are unconcerned about the real issues of the day, people who are indifferent to the good, the true and the beautiful and who just throw their minds into neutral and go where they're pushed, people who are concerned with trivialities and who spend their days and their nights concentrating on things which don't really make any difference--whether or not men wear pajamas or night shirts.

I suggest for you a better and a higher goal for life--seeking the best things. I urge you to do what Paul, that great, early Christian missionary urged the Philippians to do, "Fix your mind on the things which are holy, and right, and pure, and beautiful, and good."

In one sense of the word, and in a very important sense of the word, to seek the best everywhere is what it means to be truly religious. Do you seek the best in art? Do you ever go to a museum or art gallery and study there the masterpieces that have been produced by the human race, the best artistic creation of which man is capable, that which we know is inspired because it inspires millions of others? Do you seek the best in art, or are you satisfied to look at the cheap, and vulgar, and pornographic which displays that which is crude and can never inspire, only degrade?

Do you seek the best in music? Don't smile. I'm not going to criticize the kind of music you listen to on those two radio stations that were mentioned here last Sunday. That's a part of youth. That's a part of growing up. But are you also interested in something that's better than that, something which millions of people through many decades have endorsed as being the best, the most beautiful, the most inspiring music which man is capable of producing?

Do you seek the best in the world's literature? Are you satisfied with dime novels, cowboy stories, mysteries, science fiction, none of which may be bad, but none of which is adequate to challenge the human mind and the human spirit? Do you seek the best in literature?

One of the great writers of the English tongue was Charlotte Bronte. It is said that when she was at school her classmates were amused to see her hold up before her shortsighted eyes, sometimes for hours, a wood-cut, scrutinizing it carefully,

and then saying wonderful things about it. When she got a chance to get away from school, she wouldn't go to Regent Street, where the richer girls spent their time shopping, but to the National Gallery and straight to the best things there. Because she was always seeking the best, she was one day able to produce some of the best.

Everything you do today is affecting all of your tomorrows. You can never be tomorrow what you are not preparing to be today. If you someday want to bring out of yourself great literature, great artistic works, engineering genius, improvements in medical science, whatever it may be; if you want that for yourself someday, you must be putting the best that there is into your life today.

III

It is trite and probably needless to say this morning that we live in an age of rapid change. There is change everywhere about us, even in the realm of morality there is evidence of change. There is change in religion, and change must always come in all fields of human inquiry. In the midst of change there are always some people who suggest non-commitment. Don't commit yourself too strongly to anything, they say. It may change tomorrow, then you'll be disappointed. Don't get too attached or too devoted to other people or to one set of beliefs or values. Don't commit yourself.

But those people are wrong! It is in the time of rapid change that we need more than ever commitment to central convictions. When everything else is changing we need to have an anchor which holds us to that which is not changing. That anchor for us Christians is God as revealed in Jesus Christ. That God who is the same yesterday, today and forever. Without that firm conviction in that central principle, how will we know what are the best things we ought to be seeking? We must have a foundation upon which to build or else, as Jesus pointed out at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, we shall be building upon sand, and when the winds of change blow, and the storms of difficulty beat upon us, and the rains of discouragement beset us, our whole life will fall apart. We must always seek the best things, and the best things are always with God and with those who know God.

The life which lies before you is not going to be a breeze. You are going to face all kinds of difficulties and temptations and challenges. If you seek only those things which are light and frivolous, those things which offer temporary satisfactions, those things which have a lot of glitter and glamour to them, you will perhaps find some temporary joy and happiness. But lasting joy, and permanent success rest not upon these things. They rest upon the ability and the talent that God has put within you and how you use it in the service of others.

Listen to this "Song from the Slums", written by that famous Japanese Christian, Kagawa:

I cannot invent
New things
Like the airships
Which sail
On silver wings;
But today
A wonderful thought
In the dawn was given
And the stripes on my robe
Shining from wear
Were suddenly fair
Bright with the light
Falling from Heaven--
Gold, and silver, and bronze
Lights from the windows of Heaven.
And the thought
Was this:
That a secret plan
Is hid in my hand;
That my hand is big,
Big,
Because of this plan;
That God
Who dwells in my hand
Knows this secret plan
Of the things He will do for the world
Using my hand!

Seek the best things always, that you may use them in the service of your church, your fellowmen, your world, your God.

The foe is stern and eager,
The fight is fierce and long,
But he has made us mighty,
And stronger than the strong.