

September 17, 1967  
Deuteronomy 8:1-3  
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### IN THE NATURE OF THINGS

"This do and thou shalt live."

--Luke 10:28

Through some queer psychological quirk which some of you may share with me, every summer when I have become saturated with theology and philosophy, I get a sudden passion to read some detective stories. After a few volumes have kept me awake into the late hours of the night, the passion passes and I return to more or less normal.

I am not particularly ashamed of this literary lapse, for anyone truly interested in the whole of life can find some worthwhile lessons concerning it almost anywhere. For example, let me cite the story of The Doomdorf Mystery, by Melville Post.

In this story, Doomdorf is a Dutchman who settles in Virginia and corrupts the inhabitants with raw whiskey. Two men, Abner Duncan and Squire Randolph, determine that they will do something about it. They go to Doomdorf's mansion at night bent on doing him harm, only to discover him lying on a couch already dead with a hole in his chest. The door is bolted from the inside and all the windows latched. He seems untouched by his own or any other human hand. Abner Duncan solves the mystery. The following day, taking the squire with him, he spreads the dead man's coat upon the couch and waits. As the sun gradually creeps along the wall it is focused by a whiskey decanter and touches the percussion cap of a loaded gun. The gun roars and the dead man's coat leaps up riddled by shot. The surprised squire calls it an accident. Duncan calls it the mysterious justice of God.

It is about this mysterious justice of God that I wish to speak this morning.

## II

This divine justice was summed up by Moses at Mt. Sinai when he told the Hebrew people that God had delivered to them certain rules, principles, or laws by which they must live, and to ignore which would cause them to perish:

"All the commandments I command thee this day shall ye observe to do, that ye may live."

Jesus reiterated these principles of justice when he summed up all the law in two great commandments--to love God and thy neighbor as thyself--and concluded:

"This do and thou shalt live."

## In The Nature of Things - page 2

All rational men realize that there are some moral and ethical imperatives which permeate all of life. Some things are better than other things. We recognize that some things ought to be, and that other things ought not to be done. Parents spend a great many years and thousands of words trying to implant these imperatives into the minds of their children. Then they spend a good many sleepless nights hoping they have been successful.

The fact that men quarrel and argue over what is good and bad, right and wrong, indicates their conviction that there are certain standards men ought to live by. Different cultures and different ages may have different standards, but the differences are usually in degree, not in kind. For instance, there are differences of opinion as to how many wives a man may have, but little if any difference concerning a man's responsibility to be faithful to his wife or wives.

These standards, concepts, rules, laws, or whatever it is you would like to call them, are what we used to refer to as "the law of nature". They are laws of nature because they are inherent in the nature of things. They are there. They operate. They are inescapable. And ignorance is no defense against their operation or against the consequences of breaching them.

### III

An individual, or a whole people, may choose to ignore or reject the laws of nature, but they cannot escape the inexorable operation of those laws. Those who choose to have no standards or principles by which to govern their lives will soon discover that their society degenerates into chaos and anarchy with every individual doing what seems to be convenient or expedient to him.

I suggest to you this morning that that is precisely what is happening in our society today. Every morning as I finish reading the newspaper I am forced to say to myself, "This society is sick, sick, sick; and it is getting sicker every day."

I don't like to be a prophet of doom, I don't enjoy condemning the society of which I am a part. I would like to be able to say, "God's in His heaven and all's right with the world." I cannot. God is in His heaven, but all is far from right in His world.

We are a generation which has sought to ignore and reject the natural law, or what those who are religious refer to as the moral imperatives. Rather we would live by the philosophy that anything goes as long as one gets what he wants. We have a new rule of life called situational ethics. What it means is, do what seems right at the moment. It is really no ethic at all. The new morality is just another name for old-fashioned sin.

Consider what those mixed instruments of good and evil called newspapers bring to our attention everyday:

1. A front page story by an unknown pseudo psychologist, who insists that a little adultery is good for marriage.
2. News that policemen must be on hand at every subway and elevated station in the city of Chicago to protect the public against criminal acts.
3. Religious leaders and school teachers defying the law they are supposed to teach others to respect.
4. Men and women turning to violence and threats of violence to achieve what they consider to be justice for certain groups.

Each of these activities contravenes the laws of nature, and the moral laws of religion which seek to codify the laws of nature. These latter say:

1. Thou shalt not commit adultery. The family, the all important basic unit of society depends upon purity in the marital relationship.
2. Thou shalt not kill or steal or covet, for then no man is safe even in his own home.
3. Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's. Without respect for law and order, there will ultimately be no respect for man or God.
4. They that live by violence shall perish by violence, and many innocent people will perish with them.

#### IV

The law of nature, religious morality, is not arbitrary. It is based on centuries of human experience and revealed by God through mankind's best and wisest sages and saints.

Ask yourself, do you want to live in a world where it is common practice to lie and you can trust no one? Do you want to live in a world where men have no respect for human life or private property and no one is secure? Do you want to live in a society where love and security of the home is sacrificed for the sake of lust and passion? That is the kind of society we are rapidly moving toward. Who more than Christians are responsible for reversing the trend?

Let me share a quotation from J. Edgar Hoover, who knows more than most men what he is talking about:

"In the history of the world, no figure has reinforced the true and good more than Jesus of Nazareth, and no book has wielded greater power for Godliness and decency than the Bible. To know the Judaic-Christian realities afresh is the great consuming need of the younger generation today, and there is little hope of their renewal unless adults make these commitments their own. Never have the churches--clergy and laity--lived in a time of greater opportunity to exhibit the importance of faith and trust in God and of obedience to His will, and never in the history of our generation would their failure to do so be more calamitous."

V

President Lowell of Harvard was once asked how he managed to make so many important decisions during a single day of his busy life. "It's not too difficult," said he. "There are only a few, perhaps half a dozen, principle standards of value by which I make my judgments. Almost every decision fits one of these broad categories."

No nation, no society, no family, can long endure without adherence to these "principle standards of value", these laws of nature which are inherent in the very nature of things. The penalties and consequences are likewise inherent in the nature of things and cannot be avoided. When Moses and Jesus said, "This do and thou shalt live," the implication is that if you do not do these things you will die. And so you will--if not physically, then morally and spiritually.

An excellent parallel comes from the medieval story of the blacksmith who took such pride in his work that he put a special mark upon everything he produced. One day the town in which he lived was conquered and he was thrown into a dungeon. He was shackled with heavy chains. This did not bother him because he was an exceedingly powerful man and he knew all about chains. He was confident he could find the weakest link and exacting pressure on it break loose and make his way to freedom. But as he passed the chains through his hands he came upon the secret mark which told him that he himself had forged this chain. He cried out with despair because he would find no weak link in it. He was doomed to be held in bondage by chains which he himself had forged.

That story has repeated itself in one form or another countless numbers of times throughout the course of human history. There is nothing to prevent it from repeating itself again on a large scale in our own time. It will not be an accident, but part of the mysterious justice of God. Christians and others who live by the rule of God and practice the law of love are the only hope of salvation.