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Galatians 6:1-9
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BEYOND THE LABEL

"For if a man think himself to be something when
he is nothing he deceiveth himself."

--Galatians 6:3

Earlier this week I was involved in some lengthy discussions with a group of thoughtful men concerning the question of what is the real meaning and purpose of life. Ministers, psychiatrists, sociologists, and many others are constantly telling us that we need meaning if we are not to go to pieces, but just what should that meaning be?

In the group of which I was a part, many answers were suggested. The meaning of life is to develop the best self, to fully use one's potentialities, to be what God wants one to be, to find union with God.

It is no doubt true that every man is looking for some meaning in life. Some find it in the pursuit of pleasure, some in the gratification of sexual desires, some in the possession of power, others in the search for spiritual reality. This seeking after significance seems normal and natural in man. But what seems terribly strange is the large number of persons who seem to get some queer kind of pleasure out of trying to fool others, fool God, and even fool themselves as to just who and what they are. Perhaps we all do this to a certain extent, but it is surprising the lengths to which some will go.

I suppose I really shouldn't have been, but I was really astonished a short time ago when I learned that no small number of persons, the majority of them women, solicit certain prestigious clothing stores for labels that they might sew them into clothes purchased at other less prestigious stores. All of this is done, I suppose, in order to impress others, but:

"Oh what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive."

And in the long run we deceive no one. We are eventually found out and revealed as the inadequate, insecure, deceitful person we really are. There is no hope of our ever obtaining meaning for life by fraud and deception, and when one is finally found out, his condition becomes worse at the end than it was "when first (he) practiced to deceive."

II

Meaning for life must come from within. It can never be given to us by something or someone outside ourselves. We can pin all kinds of labels on ourselves and they do not change the real self one iota. They may give us some temporary sense of importance, but in the end we are always found out and revealed for what we really are.

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No better illustration comes to mind than a story I once heard Bishop Hughes relate. That great Methodist preacher, with whom I once had the privilege of working, told of a woman who one day came to her minister asking for a letter of transfer to another denomination. He knew she had already been a member of two or three denominations, so before giving her the letter of transfer he invited her into his study for a word of advice which he told her had once been given him by a druggist. This was the advice: "It doesn't do any good to change the label on an empty bottle!"

Is not that good advice for every one of us who is tempted to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, to pretend to be something when he is nothing. One day we all will be forced to face ourselves as we are, and the more we have tried to deceive ourselves, the more disastrous will be our discovery of reality.

Jesus spoke to this situation when he condemned the Pharisees for pretending to be religious by chanting prayers in public, wearing certain symbolic religious appurtenances, and putting on the appearance of having great spiritual depth. Said he, "If you have only the semblance of religion and none of its reality, if you speak all the right words, but fail to live them, you are like a beautiful, white sepulchre, nice to look at on the outside, but on the inside it is still full of dead men's bones." Very apt and to the point, is it not? To go through life flying false colors is indeed to become dead inside.

III

So we are given the advice and admonition to be ourselves. All well and good, but which self shall we be?

"Within my earthly temple there's a crowd,
There's one of me that's humble, one that's proud;
There's one that's brokenhearted for his sins,
And one who unrepentant sits and grins.
There's one who loves his neighbor as himself
And one who cares for naught but fame and pelf.
From much corroding care would I be free
If once I could determine which is me."

It's not easy to determine. We are all a bit like that man suffering from amnesia who walked onto the stage of a theater one day, faced the audience and pleaded, "Can anyone please tell me who I am?" We may have some difficulty determining who we are because we have deceived ourselves so long. When we seek to convince others that we are something we are not, the danger is that we may one day begin to believe it and then it may take a psychiatrist several months to convince us that we are not that person at all.

The psychiatrist can do that. Unfortunately he cannot do much to show us who we ought to be. He may be able to direct us a bit, but we have to do most of it for ourselves by first of all being absolutely honest with ourselves. That for many people is a shattering

experience. I have seen it happen to a number of men when they get to be about 40 years of age, all those dreams and visions of what they might one day accomplish are now seen for what they really were--just dreams. You're not going to be the president of the corporation. You're not going to have all the material things you once dreamed of having. The fame and prestige you so much desired are now retreating from your grasp. You are forced to look at yourself as you are. It can indeed be a shattering and ego-crushing experience. But I promise you that if you face it and learn how to confront and live with your real self you can find that deep satisfaction and peace which we all so much covet and which is greater far than wealth and power and prestige are.

IV

Yes, labels are libels, whether we pin them on ourselves or on others. We have a lot of labeling going on in our country today, especially as we approach election time. Not only are labels usually libelous, they are also divisive and thus harmful to the unity that is needed in our country or in any institution we may cherish. We find it easy to label one another liberal or conservative, socialist or capitalist, and divide everybody up into the good guys and the bad guys. And what is the standard measurement? Ourselves and our cherished little ideas and opinions.

Labels are libels precisely because no label ever has an exact definition. Two people may call themselves liberals or conservatives and be poles apart in their basic political or religious ideas. Most of us are conservatives or liberals because we think we are conservatives or liberals, and what we think about ourselves becomes the basis for the tag we put on others.

"Judge righteous judgments", said Jesus. But many of our judgments are "right" strictly from our own limited viewpoint.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist Church, once learned this lesson the hard way. He labeled a man mean and stingy because that man gave so little to philanthropy. He expressed his contempt to the man's face and the man replied, "I know a man who buys at the week's beginning a pennyworth of parsnips and boils them in water. All that week the parsnips are his food and the water his drink." "Who is that man?" asked Wesley. The person whom he had condemned replied, "I am that man," then went on to explain that although he had a moderate income he so lived in this penurious fashion in order that he might pay back the debts he had incurred before becoming a Christian. Judge ye righteous judgments!

V

Some of us, it is to be supposed, put false labels on ourselves or on others because we think we will thereby appear more respectable than we really are. If this is the case, then respectability has become a sin. Carl Jung, famous psychiatrist, has said it this way:

"To be respectable means, as the word says, to allow oneself to be seen; that is, a respectable person is one who answers to public expectation, one who wears an ideal mask--in short a fraud. Good form is not a fraud, but when respectability suppresses the soul, that real divinely-willed essence of man, then one becomes that thing which Christ called 'a whited sepulchre'."

The only way to significant meaning in life is to learn how to accept oneself as one is and take up the challenge to strive to be what one could, with God's help, become. St. Paul said it this way in his letter to the Philippians:

"Forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus."

There can be no meaning for life greater than this.