

October 13, 1968
Proverbs 2:1-10
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FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

"Then you will . . . find the knowledge of God."

--Proverbs 2:5

Long years ago when I first came across Charles Dickens' Tale of Two Cities, I was intrigued by the title the author gave to his first and last chapters. The first was, if you remember, "The Beginning of the End", and the last was, "The End of the Beginning". I was also very much impressed, and have never managed to forget, the first sentence in the book, which has come back to me over and over again through the years:

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of credulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair."

It may well be that Dickens' words about those times which encompassed the French Revolution could be validly applied to every time. We hear many people today insist that the world, and more particularly the United States, is in a distressing and hopeless mess. Arthur Krock, New York Times correspondent, at the end of his distinguished career, observes that our nation may well have the shortest period of worldly power of any civilization in history.

But hope does spring eternal in the human breast. It had better, for if we lose hope we are apt to lose everything. Fortunately God always gives us a goodly supply of young persons who are the epitome of hope and who temper the hopelessness and despair of the older generation. These young persons here this morning are a typical segment of the world's best hope, for our best hope is never in institutions, but in people.

I must confess that when I look at our culture, at what my generation has done with the world, I am not impressed. I am often discouraged. But one does need perspective. The world handed my generation by a previous generation was not a particularly good heritage either. And the world my generation is passing on to the next generation is not entirely of my generation's making. Each generation passes on a heritage filled with the mistakes and sins of all the past generations. True, we could have done a great deal more to correct the evils than we have, but they are not all of our making.

It is likewise important to realize that each generation does pass on something vital and significant, even the poorest generation. We pass on a certain record of many significant individual lives--lives of men and women who have overcome terrible handicaps, lives of

those who have achieved victories in the triumph over pain and difficulty. Each generation gives to the next generation a whole host of little men and women who in their own small ways have become great because they have not let the human spirit be overcome by evil. The younger generation may not like the kind of world we bequeath them but they cannot ignore nor fail to appreciate the record of some of the individual men and which we bequeath them.

II

In other words, we must always seek a truly objective understanding of the world in which we live. We may otherwise find ourselves in the position of that man who stepped on a fortune-telling scale and said to his wife: "This card says I'm handsome, intelligent and witty." His wife looked at the card and dryly remarked, "Yes, and it's got your weight wrong too." We must always try to see the total picture, and if we want only to see evil and none of the good, it is not difficult to see what we want to see.

What is truly important to say to these young people this morning, and to all of us, is that no matter what the condition of the world, we can make our own lives significant and worthwhile by responding properly to the kind of world in which we live. But we can do that only as we prepare ourselves for the future. We can do that only as we seek always to be our best self and to develop our total self.

Over and over again I am amazed at the talents and abilities I see in certain persons with whom I have been acquainted for a considerable length of time, but whom I have never really known. This surprise comes to me out of the lives of all kinds of people and people of all ages. Over and over again young people surprise me and please me with the insight and the conviction which seldom appears on the surface, but which is nevertheless there. The vast majority of young people with whom I am acquainted are solid, good, substantial young people. All they need are good examples, proper guidance and patience.

I heard the story the other day of two small boys, ages 7 and 3, who were ordering ice cream cones. The little one kept announcing, "I want vanilla, I want vanilla." Unfortunately the supply of vanilla had just run out and the adult customers watched to see what would happen. Unhesitatingly the older boy ordered two strawberry cones, gave one to the younger boy and said, "Here you are, pink vanilla." That kind of quick thinking and understanding marks most youth today as it has always done. There is nothing wrong with being young. The important thing is how does one use his youth.

Let me suggest quickly and briefly how all of us, but especially the young, ought to use our time and our energy to the best advantage if we want to pass on to the next generation a better, richer heritage than past generations have passed on to us.

III

First, keep yourself physically fit; your body always at its best! If you do, knowingly, anything that will incapacitate your physical vitality you sin against God and man.

I don't like to have to say this but I say it without equivocation: In light of the medical knowledge we have today, any young person who starts smoking is a fool. And if you are foolish in this, the chances are you will be foolish in other things just as crucial.

Any young person who lets the use of alcohol steal away his senses until he can no longer think for himself is committing the worst kind of sin against himself and starting that self on a habit that can not only ruin his life, but the lives of all others who love and care about him.

As Paul put it in the New Testament, "The body is the temple of God." It is a gift God has given you with which you might serve Him. If you misuse it and mistreat it, if you let it run down and become inadequate to the tasks that are set before it, you sin against God, against your fellowmen, and against your own best self.

Keep yourself physically fit! The world needs you at your best.

IV

Secondly, keep yourself mentally alert. You can't do this if you let your body run down. The mind, the body, and the spirit all interact, all work together to make you what you are. If any one is inefficient and inadequate, then all will be affected. If the mind, which gives guidance and direction to the other two, is not fit and alert, you can never become your best self.

Those persons who contribute most to society and do the most to advance human knowledge, are those with intellectual curiosity, who want to know, who keep asking why, even though it drives their parents and their teachers crazy.

I may be what you young people call a "square", or a "queer", or whatever the latest terminology may be, but my experience has convinced me that the most exciting experience in life is not to hot rod it down Wisconsin Avenue, or take a mind-expanding drug, or even be a football hero; it is to discover some new little piece of truth which one has never known or considered before. All the rest is but a passing shadow, the excitement of the moment, vanity. But truth endures forever and leads us on to new and even more exciting truths.

Be mentally alert! Seek the truth. Use to the full the wonderful and mysterious brain God gave you as a human being which he gave to no other species of life. Why do you suppose he gave it to you? What do you suppose he wants you to do with it?

V

Third, be morally strong! You knew I was going to say that, didn't you? I wouldn't be much of a minister if I didn't, would I? But I don't say it just because I'm a minister, I say it because it's true. To be morally strong, honest, loyal to the highest and best that you know, pure in mind and body, faithful to God and the highest and best heritage of the human race--this is the most important thing of all.

If you are physically perfect and have the brain of a genius, but have no moral principles, you may destroy the world rather than save it. So far as I know, Hitler and Stalin were in excellent physical condition. Both had a peculiar kind of mental genius which enabled them to become the leaders of great nations. Yet because they had no moral or spiritual discipline in their lives, both became evil and corrupt tyrants, responsible for death and destruction unparalleled in history.

Yes, there is a moral and a spiritual dimension to life which cannot be ignored without disastrous consequences. I'm not now talking about the big things like murder, and rape, and kidnapping, and grand larceny, and armed robbery. A very small percentage of the population ever engage in these activities condemned by the Ten Commandments. No, I'm talking about the so-called "little things", also condemned by the Ten Commandments, like cheating, shop lifting, lying, and a whole host of other bad habits that lead a person inevitably to a small, wasted, weak life, when he could have had a rich, full, meaningful existence. It is precisely these "little things" that finally destroy us because we keep telling ourselves that these little things aren't important.

Along with all of this goes your obligation to God. He gave you life. He gives you all that sustains life. Don't you owe Him something, an appreciation for all He has given, gratitude for the privilege of being alive in such a time as this?

It may be the worst of times, but you can help make it the best of times. It is an age of foolishness, but you can add wisdom to it if you will discipline and prepare yourself. It is a time of doubt and darkness, but you can add a little light if you will, and help transform the winter of despair into the spring of hope.

Life has indeed many disappointments. Don't you be one of them.