

LIVING WITH NO RESISTANCE

January 28, 1990

Two weeks ago, the idea for this sermon appeared across the frontal lobes of my mind. I was convinced of the importance for us to realize that everything in life shouldn't be easy. We have mountains to climb. Two weeks ago I was certain of my philosophy of life. I began to have some doubts about my thoughts on Thursday as I was shoveling the snow out of the driveway for the third time. The doubts were particularly strong while I was digging in the pile of snow the snow plow leaves at the entrance to the driveway.

So this morning you might have to convince me that resistance is necessary for growth. You may have to convince me that shoveling the snow out of the driveway was good for the body and mind. Personally, I think that laying on the couch watching a football game is best for body and mind. This morning's sermon appears to be intended for me instead of you.

Tell you what I'm going to do. I will share with you what I have written. If that doesn't convince me then you can affirm that we need mountains to climb as you exit the nave.

I. WITHOUT RESISTANCE, WE DECLINE

First, without physical resistance and mental and emotional challenges we decline. It's ironic that our goal is to have it easy and enjoy the good life. We would like to have "Miller Time" all the time. We work hard for the day when life will be smooth and easy. We want jobs that are easy. We even make bargains with God to make things better. I've seen others and have done this myself. When life becomes chaotic and out of control, we tell God we will go to church or we will pray more if He will help make life easier. We get sick and we turn to God. But should the easy life be our goal?

A. When life doesn't challenge us, we become weak. In 1982, two Russian cosmonauts landed safely back on earth after 211 days in space. Physically, they suffered from dizziness, high pulse rates and heart palpitations. They couldn't walk for a week, and after 30 days they were still undergoing therapy for atrophied muscles and weakened hearts.

Why were they in such weakened physical condition? At zero gravity, the muscles of the body begin to waste away because there is no "resistance." To counteract this, the Soviets invented the "penguin suit." This is a running suit laced with elastic bands. It resists every move the cosmonauts make, forcing them to exert their strength. This system is working. After 326 days in orbit, in 1987, the cosmonauts returned to earth in good health.

B. Without resistance, life becomes dull and boring. Just notice the human life cycle from birth to death.

Most of us dream about retirement. There is good reason for this. Dr. Maxwell Jones, in his book, "Growing Old: The Ultimate Freedom," says that "Lifestyle, up to the time of retirement, has been largely a matter of conformity." As children, we have to follow the guidelines of our parents, teachers and peer group. Later we have to follow the guidelines of our employers and maybe spouses, depending on who is the boss around the house. No wonder we dream about the freedom of retirement. And when it does come, after being at home three days with nothing to do, we are bored silly. It is no wonder that companies have classes for those approaching retirement, just to help them plan for that.

C. However, there is another point to the need for resistance that is stronger than any I have mentioned. Without resistance to our ideas, without challenges to our assumptions, life becomes "hell on earth."

Years ago, I remember watching a regular television program that very well could have been "The Twilight Zone." In this particular episode, a man who was a criminal and a real leach on society died. There were no redeeming elements in his personality at all. At his demise, his spirit is ushered into this beautiful room. There he is met by a man who is dressed much like a butler. He is given instructions that if he desires anything, all he has to do is make his request to his valet.

A man with his unlimited desires had a lot of requests. He requested lovely ladies to keep him company and plenty of booze and food. But he also liked to gamble and he enjoyed winning big money. Poker games were arranged with players that were well heeled. Since he desired to win, every hand was arranged so he would win. After always winning and always obtaining everything he wanted, he became more and more frustrated. Eternity was dull and boring. Irritated, he remarked how living in heaven was frustrating. His assistant quickly corrected him. "What gave him the idea that this place was heaven." It was really hell.

We often long dreamily for days without difficulty. However, God knows better. The easier our life, the weaker our spiritual fiber. The easier our lives, the weaker the emotional and mental fiber. The easier our lives, life becomes dull and hell on earth. We grow only through exertion. (I realize that there are limits to how many challenges human beings can stand. God communicated that with the promise that He will not put any more on us than we can stand. We may put more on ourselves than we can stand.)

II. CHRISTIAN LIFE INTENDED TO BE CHALLENGING

In the passage I read, Jesus went a step further. He said that we are being blessed when life becomes difficult. He even said that we should "rejoice and be glad" when "men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you." Be thankful when our very beings are challenged.

A. God must want everyone to feel blessed. Just observe the normal stages of parenting. When Mark Jr. was about four and David was a baby, I worked during the day and Diana worked the evening shift in a local hospital. She took care of the boys in the morning and I did it in the evening. I also had a little part-time barber shop behind the house. Usually, a farmer would come for a haircut during feeding or bath time. It was stressful to satisfy the customer and the boys.

To assist me, Diana put on the kitchen counter the jars of strained peas and the Blue Berry Buckel for dessert. David loved Blue Berry Buckel. He didn't like strained peas. Under those sometimes hurried feeding circumstances, David ate a lot of Blue Berry Buckel. In fact, during the nightly bathing ritual it was hard to wash the blue stains from around his mouth. I didn't want Diana to know he wasn't obtaining a balanced diet. So like most parents, I prayed for the time when the boys would be able to feed and bathe themselves. God answered my prayers and now the grocery bill is like a mortgage payment and there is never enough hot water. "Now I look back at those days and see that we were blessed. God must have intended for every phase of life to challenge us.

B. Blessed is the Christian when his or her moral and ethical values are challenged. Let's face the assumption that Christians aren't being persecuted any more. We do not

live in the days of Nero when he wrapped Christians in pitch and set them on fire to light his gardens. We aren't being persecuted in such a way, but persecution does come.

There are farmers and business persons who have lost everything because they would not violate ethical principles. They chose to deal honorably with their bankers, business associates and their customers, only to lose everything they worked for. Maybe some of you have lost customers because you would not violate Christian ethical principles.

Some are persecuted for holding to Christian morals. Ask some of the youth in the church how they are treated when their friends are saying yes to drugs, sex and alcohol and they are saying no. Ask wives whose husbands refuse to attend church about the criticism they receive for their faith. Ask them about the resistance they receive on Sunday morning as they try to get the children ready for Sunday School. Ask a black family who just happens to be traveling on Sunday morning. They stop at a church for worship only to obtain a cold reception at an all-white church.

C. Blessed are you when the church challenges you to grow. Sometimes we can lull ourselves into the assumption that the church is primarily a place of refuge and rest. This is not only a place of rest but a place to have one's faith and strength restored. With our strength renewed then we can go out and meet the challenges of life.

Haven't you had a brilliant idea for the Board of Deacons or the Christian Ed. Board or whatever board you serve? You enter the meeting all excited about your idea only to have some bozos shoot holes in your brilliant idea. I've experienced clergy meetings that degenerated into gripe sessions. We just couldn't understand why the congregation wouldn't agree to our brilliant suggestions. The church needs to challenge both our faith and our ideas. This is the way to create growing disciples.

Evangelical Christians believe that we are "justified by faith alone." Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this was "cheap grace." This means we don't have to do anything to be in Christ but to accept that we are accepted. Bonhoeffer correctly charged that such belief relieves us of the obligations of discipleship. The grace that God extends to us was bought with a price. It cost God the life of the Son. Costly grace is a treasure hidden in a field. A person will go and sell all he has just to follow Christ. Bonhoeffer, as you know, lived what he believed, for he was executed by the Nazis because of that belief. He was a disciple of Christ who didn't have things easy.

CONCLUSION

Blessed is the Christian who is challenged by others and by life itself. Rejoice and be glad when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake. Well, my mind tells me Jesus is right. But to be honest, I am not all that happy about the need for resistance. I would rather be laying on the couch watching the "Super Bowl."

Let us pray. Dear God of grace; we thank you for the challenges and resistance we experience in life. We just pray for the wisdom and the strength to deal appropriately with those challenges. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.