

AS A MAN THINKETH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 22, 1959 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

On a Saturday afternoon some years ago we were on a promontory of the Pelos Verde Hills in Southern California looking out over one of the bays of the Pacific Ocean. Down beneath there were several little sailing yachts, racing each other over a prescribed course. The blue of the ocean with the trim little boats and white sails made a beautiful picture. The boats would go in one direction for a while, then they would tack and go in another direction. They would tack again and go a different course, but all the while they were moving in the direction that their skippers wanted them to go. The wind was constant through all of this; the ocean was just about the same when they finished as when they began; the difference was in the set of their sails. The setting of the sails determines where the craft will move.

There is another illustration that will suggest the theme that we have in mind. Here in Tennessee we have a number of limestone rock quarries. There men dig deep into the earth and bring out huge chunks of limestone. Near almost every quarry there is a huge rock crusher. These rock crushers take the stone and, depending upon the desire of the man who is running the rock crusher, crush it into various sizes of rock. It can come out half the size of a man's fist, or if the setting is different it can come out the size of an egg, or the size of a walnut, or the size of a pea. It is even possible for these crushers to reduce the big stones to powder of the consistency of cement. It all depends on the way the man sets the machine, rather than upon the rock.

Attitudes

By analogy I want to suggest that much of the success or failure of a man's life depends, not so much upon the events that come into that life, as upon the set of the sails, or the attitudes with which the man faces the events of his life. There is a passage in Proverbs 23:7 which says, "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he." The basic attitudes that we hold largely determine whether life seems heavy and burdensome, or whether we rise over our difficulties to become radiantly triumphant. One man with essentially the same circumstances of life becomes a great person; another becomes discouraged, despondent, and eventually a failure. Much of the final outcome depends upon the attitude of heart, the set of the sails.

The Hyper-Critical Attitude

Let us see some of the attitudes of life that men have. We can divide them into negative attitudes and positive attitudes. We could have said bad attitudes and good attitudes. Of course, there will not be time to list all of the attitudes, but a few significant ones can be mentioned. First of all, on the negative side there is the hyper-critical attitude that so many people drift into. This is looking at everything through a jaundiced eye. If it is a television program or a radio program, the hyper-critical do not see the skill of the excellence, but the faults. If it is the behavior of a neighbor that is being considered, the good things pass unnoticed, but any flaws are singled out for special attention.

I have long liked C. L. Lewis' little book, *The Screwtape Letters*. It is an ingenuous little book which imagines that Screwtape, who is one of the exalted devils in hell, is writing to his nephew, Wormwood, up on the earth. These are letters of instruction on how that Wormwood can best wage the campaign against the enemy. Of course, the enemy is Christ. In the 17th chapter of *The Screwtape Letters* there is a description of a sweet, saintly, little, old lady. If you had stopped her to ask her for an appraisal of herself, she would have been too modest to give it, but if she had given it she would have described herself as a lovely, saintly, little Christian. But, when it came time for tea in the afternoon, she was a tyrant. The servant girl could never prepare the tea properly. It was either too hot or too cold; it was either too strong or too weak. And the toast--she just wanted one little piece of toast, but she did want it properly toasted. It was either too dry and too hard, or it had not been toasted enough. She would exclaim, "You just cannot find servants that know how to do things anymore." Actually, she was a tyrant. When the servant brought the food for the evening meal, it was too much, and, under the guise of being very frugal and not wanting to waste, she would send it back in order that just the proper amount fixed in just the proper way should be brought.

Judge Not

It is too easy to get into the negative way of thinking; it is so easy to see the faults about us; it is too easy to become critical, and even hypercritical. It is particularly easy as we grow older and as our physical infirmities increase in number. Yet this is one of the attitudes of life that each one of us wants to avoid. It is one of the attitudes of life that each one of us must avoid, for this is what Jesus was speaking of in the 7th chapter of Matthew, in the sermon on the mount, when he said "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured unto you. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matt. 7:1-3). The attitude that we have toward others is going to be the standard of measurement that God will use on us when we stand before him in judgment.

It is just across the page in my Bible, in Matt. 6:14-15, that the same emphasis is given at the end of the model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. After he had told them to pray like this, "Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name," he concluded by saying, "For if we forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses." The uncritical, kind person with the generous heart is the one who is most nearly like our Lord.

The Closed Mind

Another negative attitude that we should want to avoid is the attitude of the closed mind. When Jesus was here on earth he performed the greatest miracles that have ever been performed. He healed the sick of every kind; he even raised the dead. But tragically the Pharisees and the Sadducees--the leaders of the Jews--had so set their minds, had such unchangeable convictions of what the Messiah would be like, that they could not see the real Messiah and so passed him by. In the 9th chapter of Luke is told that interesting little episode of Jesus wanting to spend the night in a town in Samaria. The Samaritans turned him away, however, closing their gates against the blessings that he might have brought them through his teaching and through his working of miracles. They cursed themselves because they had closed minds.

A passage that comes to mind in this connection is Acts 13:46, in which the apostle Paul is in Antioch of Pisidia, preaching. He preached first to the Jews, as his instructions were, then he said, "It was necessary that the word of God should first be spoken to you. Seeing ye thrust it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, lo, we turn to the gentiles." The attitude of the closed mind has blocked in ancient times and in modern times a great many people in their real desire of knowing God and being saved. The closed mind is an unworthy attitude.

The Attitude of Envy

There is also the attitude of envy or jealousy. Unfortunately, our world divides itself into classes of people. There are those who are called rich and those who are called poor. Usually the poor have a rather negative view of the rich. A man who has to struggle to pay his bills at the end of the month usually has a rather bitter attitude toward those who do not have such a struggle. In similar fashion there have come to be tensions between employers and employees, between parents and children, and between many other groups. It is so easy for one group to look at another and not like the other group. The attitude of jealousy, or of wanting what somebody else has, is an attitude that destroys the ones who want. It hurts both groups, but it always hurts the one who envies most.

In Exodus 20:17 is the tenth of the ten commandments: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maid-servant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor anything that is thy neighbor's." The attitude of wanting what other people have whether it be education, or house, or money, is an attitude that brings disintegration to our own hearts. Let us rejoice with those who have more than we have. Let us be thankful for their blessings and wish them well. Let us be concerned for their welfare as we are for our own.

The Attitude of Hatred

The attitude of jealousy slips easily into the attitude of hatred, the attitude of retaliation. It is sometimes expressed, "He can't do that to me. I'll get even if it's the last thing I do." This is an attitude condemned in the writings of Paul to the Romans. In the great twelfth chapter of Romans, near the end, Paul writes, "Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord. But if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head." (Romans 12:19-20).

In Matthew's eighteenth chapter, Peter came to Jesus and asked him, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times? Jesus saith unto him, I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but, Until seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:21-22). We must have the attitude toward others, not of hatred or of retaliation, but of kindness and good will.

There are other attitudes like the attitude of pride, in which we become the center of our lives and become proud of ourselves. The Jews had that problem. When John the Baptist came to introduce Christ he said, "Think not to say within yourselves, we have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. (Matt. 3:9). The Jews were proud of the blood in their veins, proud of their traditions. Pride has always been ugly and always will be. The self-centered attitude, the attitude of fear, and many more are attitudes that Christians wish to avoid.

The Attitude of Optimism

"Are there no positive attitudes?" you ask. Yes. Time does not permit our touching many of them, but we can suggest two. One is the attitude of optimism that makes us feel warm and glad. For example, I like to meet brother J. L. Perry of this congregation and ask him, "How are you?" because I know that he will always say "Wonderful." For all these years Brother Perry has cultivated the habit of feeling wonderful. I am sure that sometimes he has not felt wonderful physically, or other wise, but he knows that a smile and a

spirit of optimism helps us to feel good. I have noticed that it never helps very much when someone says, "How are you?" to pause and delineate all your ailments. You find that people hardly listen as they pass on by.

Christian optimism is deeper, however, than just saying "Wonderful" when people ask you how you are. This optimistic view of life is deep because it is based upon the faith that we are God's children and that he will care for us. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that to them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose." That is why the Christian can say "Wonderful" at any stage in his life. Things may have taken a turn we do not wish, but we remember who we are. We are God's children, made in his image, on our way to live with him eternally. A few ups and downs in life do not really change the total picture. The attitude of optimism is possible only when you are God's child and only when you really believe his promises.

The Attitude of Love and Respect

Along with this attitude there is the attitude of love and respect. First of all, it ought to mean love and respect toward God. The greatest of all the commandments is "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." The second commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:39-31), is an attitude of love toward our fellowmen as well as toward God. This is a desire for their good, as we said it briefly a few moments ago. We pray a prayer that their children may prosper and be in health, as we pray for our own. We pray a prayer for the other man's success in business, as we pray for our own success. Think of the passage in Romans 12:10 where Paul writes, "In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another; in honor preferring one another." It is an attitude of good will, an attitude of real concern for other people. Paul says it in Galatians 6:2, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ."

There are other attitudes that I would like to mention, but these stand out against the negative attitudes of destructiveness. These are the positive Christian attitudes--love, respect and good will toward God and toward one's fellowmen. It is doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. We do it first. The attitude of optimism, based on the foundation of faith that we are God's children, also is fundamentally right. We go through life, then, not borne down by the weight of envy or hatreds or some other of the negative attitudes, but we go through life happier and more useful because we have set our sails in the right direction. We have turned the grinding knob until we have gotten the right grind for the rock.

Conclusion

Yes, a man's attitudes are basic in determining whether he is going to be happy and whether he is going to be successful. Tell me a man's basic attitudes and I will tell you how many friends he has. Tell me a man's attitudes and I will tell you whether he is doing well in his business or not. Tell me a woman's attitudes and I will describe her home to you. Deeper still, our attitudes also will determine where we will spend eternity. Our attitudes toward God and Christ and toward their commands are basic. Our attitude toward Christ is the most important attitude of our lives, for it will determine whether we accept him as our Savior and obey his commands. Let us open our hearts and let Christ come in.