

Preventable Blindness

I was talking the other night with a friend who told me how he decided once to spend a certain amount of time each evening reading the Bible to his children. He made it through *Genesis* by skipping a few stories not meant for children, but he began to bog down late in *Exodus* and got stuck hopelessly in *Leviticus*, so he moved to the New Testament where he thought surely there would be plenty of inspirational passages for young children. But he had problems there, too, with things he wasn't ready for his children to hear yet, or which were too complex, or which simply no longer had any relevance to modern life. When a minister decides to do what is called "expository preaching" — reading verses straight from the text and commenting on what they mean — she runs into the same difficulties.

She has to be selective, for one thing. As my friend found out, somewhat to his surprise, much of Scripture is simply not relevant. When Paul talks about whether people should eat meat which has been sacrificed to idols, or the young man who took his father's wife, or whether Gentiles had to be circumcised before they could become Christians, or how it is contrary to nature for men to have long hair and women to have short hair — well, it's pretty hard to convince either kids or grownups that those are useful prescriptions for modern life. So, in our last three sermons based on the book of Romans, I used only a handful of verses from the first 11 chapters. If you don't know what I spared you by doing that, find a quiet spot in the house this

afternoon and read Romans 1 through 11. In the words of scripture you will “rise up and call me blessed” for having left out 97% of it.

But things change dramatically when you get to Chapter 12. Paul leaves his long, tortured explanations of theology and metaphysics and steps abruptly through a door marked “PRACTICAL.” Chapter 12 has some of the most relevant advice in all of the New Testament, and we are going to take a close look at it. I wish I could excite you by claiming novelty for things Paul says in this chapter, because sermons that tell you something you don’t already know are more fun to create and more fun to hear. But the simple truth about our lives — and every teacher of ethics knows it — is that we have to be reminded constantly of things we have known so long that we’ve forgotten them. Romans, Chapter 12, is as useful for that as the Bible gets, so I invite you to concentrate on it for a while, using different translations at times to bring out the flavor and full meaning of what Paul has to say.

We begin, appropriately, with Verse 1, translated by that splendid scholar of Paul’s life and writings, J. B. Phillips: “With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies as a living sacrifice....” I invite you, first of all, to wonder for a moment whether you have eyes wide open to the mercies of God — to blessings so abundant and so familiar that we grow blind to them. When I sat contemplating this idea last week I tried, as I do always, to relate it to some real event in my own life, knowing that if I do that successfully the idea will relate to your life as well. And this is the analogy I found:

We do things to our houses over the years — add a porch, stretch a room, excavate a basement. I did something late last summer at the urgings of one who shares that house: I replaced a small high window on one wall of the bedroom with a big bay window, six feet by six feet....and my eyes were opened, wide! The last thing I see at night, the first thing I see in the morning is a panoramic view of No. 15 on the Rolling Hills golf course, with a little lake and a stream and huge cottonwoods and, closer to my house, one of the biggest maple trees on earth beautiful in every season — in the green glory of Spring, in the bright and massive gold of Fall, and even in winter when it shows off its stark, skeletal bare bones. I see in brand new ways what had been close by for years.

Now back to Paul: “With eyes wide open to the mercies of God.....” As I thought about the verse it occurred to me that when it comes to seeing all the ways in which we have been blessed, most of us live much of our life behind that one high little window I mentioned a moment ago. We don’t see an expanded landscape of the mercies of God. If someone happens to ask if life has been good, we walk to the little window and look out and find a bush or a patch of daffodils but not the wide view, not the stream and the lake and the great trees and the huge expanse of sky that might make us so grateful and so glad if we only saw them. In my double life as a professor and a minister I have met literally thousands and thousands of people — not just casually, but in conversations — and it remains to this day astonishing to me how differently people react to life’s mix of sun and shadow. Some wake up each day in a room with a wide window and see a world of blessings. Others wake

up, stare dully at the floor, and see a dropped sock in the corner. The many, many little things that bless our lives easily become like pictures on our walls: we live with them for years at a time without seeing them at all. I expressed pleasure in a painting the other day, and the man who lived in the house said with a touch of surprise, "I'd forgotten we had this. I really haven't looked at it for years." A parable of preventable blindness!

G. K. Chesterton, in his typically surprising way, comments on how we take for granted the blessings we have daily. "We thank God for the presents in our stockings at Christmas, but we ought to thank God we have legs in our stockings."

But the legs are so familiar, have been so long faithful, that we take them for granted, no longer "see" them. Before I mention a certain woman in order to make a point about not seeing, let me introduce you to her. Elizabeth Peabody, who died a hundred years ago, was one in a long line of distinguished American women. Many of you with children owe her a debt: she opened the first kindergarten in America, and spent a lifetime preaching innovative ideas in education. She was a brilliant teacher who enjoyed matching wits with her two brothers-in-law, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann. What I want to borrow from her life is this: she was asked one day how she happened to run into a tree on the Boston Common. Her explanation was classic: "I saw it, but I did not realize it." Realize: to comprehend, to bring vividly to mind, to understand something clearly. The physical eye registers something, the brain does not. We live like that sometimes with our wives, our husbands, our children, our friends: they grow familiar — we register familiar forms, we do not see INTO,

we do not comprehend. Paul's first request among all the many motifs of this great Chapter 12 is that we realize, that we look with open eyes through a wide window of gratitude for the multitude of things that bless our lives. I know of nothing more certain to make us happy.

Two or three of your college courses you never forget, and one of those, for me, was a graduate seminar in 19th century English essayists taught by a wonderfully eccentric professor. Our syllabus included Robert Southey, Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Coleridge and Hunt and DeQuincey — but our professor loved a writer who was even more eccentric than himself, so we spent 90% of that seminar with Charles Lamb. As often happens, the professor transferred some of his passion to the rest of us, and to this day I still rummage around occasionally in Lamb's madly whimsical essays. I did that last week, hunting a passage about saying grace — being thankful — for all sorts of things besides a meal. I found it, and knowing you to be the kind of people who will enjoy both its style and its substance, I gladly share it. It is an elegant reminder that we have so many blessings for which a grace before enjoying them might be as appropriate as a prayer at the dinner table.

“I am disposed,” Lamb wrote, “to say grace upon twenty other occasions in the course of the day besides my dinner. I want a form for setting out upon a pleasant walk, for a moonlight ramble, for a friendly meeting, or a solved problem. Why have we none for books, those spiritual repasts — a grace before Milton — a devotional exercise proper to be said before reading *The Faerie Queene* ?” Never mind the fact that few read Milton anymore, and fewer yet have even heard of Spenser's allegorical epic — the point is that one has as much

reason to give thanks for a good book as for a good meal. One of the choir members is currently having so much fun reading Steve Allen's marvelous book on *The Bible, Religion and Morality* that I fully expect her to do a "grace-before-reading-in-bed" some night: "Thank you, Lord, for this delicious meal of intelligent humor and witty scepticism, and — by the way —bless the dear old gentleman beside me who recommended it." Why not? Why not a moment of grace, of gratitude, for food that feeds the hungry mind?

But forgive me for going on about good books like a professor when the truth is that thanks before dinner can also open our eyes wide to the mercies of God. Back in 1936 Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman wrote a thoughtful, funny play entitled, *You Can't Take It With You*, and there is a touching moment early in that play when Grandpa gives thanks before his family of three generations begin their meal. "Well, Sir," he says to God, "we've been getting along pretty good for a while now, and we're certainly much obliged. Remember, all we ask, is just to go along and be happy in our own sort of way. Of course we want to keep our health, but as far as anything else is concerned, we'll leave it to you. Thank you." Nothing canned or conventional about that prayer. Even the kids would like it.

I make curious sidetrips in the course of creating a sermon, and this one about opening our eyes wide to the mercies of God was no exception. And so it was that after I found my Lamb quote on giving thanks for pleasant walks and good books, I digressed to leaf through some letters written by his contemporary, Robert Southey, and found still another way of using the Apostle Paul's advice. In one of his letters, Southey tells

about a certain Spanish gentleman who “always put on his spectacles when he was about to eat strawberries, so they might look bigger and more tempting.” It seemed hopelessly eccentric when I first read it, not nearly so foolish when I thought about it for a while. At our house, and probably at yours, the use of a magnifying lens is almost invariably tied to our *troubles*: we can’t see the small print, we’re checking a facial blemish, we’re trying to remove a splinter. It would be nice, come to think of it, if we could cultivate the habit of magnifying our blessings — or, one last time in the words of Paul, opening our eyes wide to the mercies of God.

The second half of Paul’s first sentence in this rich chapter is a plea: “Once you open your eyes to see all the mercies of God, I beg you,” he says — “as an act of intelligent worship — to offer yourselves to him as a living sacrifice.” Paul had come from a culture where for centuries people who wished to please God sacrificed a bird or an animal as an act of worship. He has discovered a better way, offering life instead of death — his vivid way of saying that if we really mean it when we profess Christian faith there will be far more to it than pleasant Sunday-morning visits for an hour of worship. Commitment, for Paul, is not occasional or casual — quite different from what it was for a young man who came into the Hallmark Store at Towne West the other day. He seemed to be new at the business of picking out cards, so he asked the store clerk to pick out something that would express a very romantic sentiment for a girlfriend. The clerk and I both smiled at this evidence of true love, and I was happy to wait patiently while she went back to the sweetheart section to look for the perfect card. She came back with a handsome one that said simply, “To the only girl I have ever loved.” While she and

I nodded our heads approvingly, the young man said, “Terrific! Wonderful! I’ll take six of those.” For his Christian friends in Rome, Paul has in mind a stronger commitment.

A commitment so strong that it may, on occasion, turn us into gadflies and nuisances when things need to be changed. There is a stirring scene in a film about the life of French novelist Emile Zola, who at 18 came up from a beautiful city in Provence to Paris to work in a publishing house. After a while, the contrast between the glossy romantic novels published by his employer, M. Larue, and the desperate lives of thousands of people in Paris, is too much for Zola, who begins to plead for more realistic novels that tell the often sordid truth about life. When his employer, Monsieur Larue, who knows the kinds of books that sell, gets fed up and fires the young man so passionately committed to social justice and compassion, Zola delivers this farewell speech: “While you, M. Larue, continue to grow fatter and richer publishing your nauseating confectionery, I shall become a mole, digging here, rooting there, stirring up the whole rotten mess where life is hard, raw and ugly. You will not like the smell of my books, M. Larue....Neither will the public prosecutor. But when the stench is strong enough, maybe something will be done about it.” For the rest of his life Zola wrote fiction dedicated to social reforms, coming to believe at last that Christians must care as passionately as he did about alleviating the misery and suffering he showed in his books. By presenting his mind and body as a living sacrifice to the principles of goodness and decency, Zola helps define the meaning of commitment.

Just as the opposite of commitment is defined by someone else who asks, “What is the devil?” and then answers his own question. “The devil,” he says, “is not a huge monster with horns and a harpoon tail and a wicked glitter in his eye. No, the devil is just taking the line of least resistance. It is inertia. It is doing nothing.” One appeal of doing nothing, of course, is that it minimizes mistakes. I have never met, or read about, a man or a woman committed to some great loyalty, driven by passion and dedication to get something done, who has not, in the process, made mistakes and been held up to ridicule. It happens so often to anybody who offers mind and heart on the altar of justice and compassion that most of us prefer to take the line of least resistance and do nothing.

Most of us — but not all of us. Remember last week’s story of the Amish boy mutilated so horribly in the family’s corn shredding machine that surgeons spent 12 hours sewing his scalp back on his head and limbs back on his body....and how the family is taking in boarders to help pay the bills? An hour after reading that I learned that one of you had already sent the family a letter of comfort and a generous check, and had urged friends to do the same. I would like to hope that the church helped in some ways to create or at least to sustain that kind of compassion, but this much I know: it is an essential part of what it means to be truly human, and it is the crowning glory of this church that so many individuals in it, acting on an impulse of love, do such things more often than the rest of us know.

We worship in this place each week under the conviction that
when we learn of God's love for us we are obliged to share that
love with others. We are glad to know that it happens. Amen.