

Self Satisfaction

2/21/60

Human life might be described as the search for satisfaction. For much of life is the result of our curiosity seeking answers and our ambition-seeking fulfillment. Most of us are ambitious little angels – driven by our sense of incompleteness. Our restlessness with things as they are, our yearning for better human relationships makes our development possible. Good old-fashioned ambition serves a noble purpose, for it issues the command “Forward march! you lazy sniveling good for nothing, middle class Protestants - git up and git.” And away we go!

Therefore to say “I’m ambitious” may be quite a healthy thing. But – healthy – even a bit of unselfish ambition may be unhealthy with selfish motives - what do I get out of this – my pay – Eritheia – (strife) - wrecking churches at Corinth and Philippi - goes on today in churches, universities, economies, locker rooms.] For to be absolutely content – not to have the drive toward improvement – development –would be to stop all progress – material and spiritual. If our ancestors had been plumb content with things as they were – we wouldn’t be here. Ambitious men and women weary of dragging stuff around worked out the first wheel, tired of paddling hung the first sail, fed up with losing their way development the first map. An ambitious Italian discovered the universe, an ambitious Genoese discovered America, ambitious people immigrated, populated and developed it. An ambitious monk formulated the Protestant faith.

And on and on we could go – until we could not help but know that a healthy holy ambition among those who have gone before us has given us the things we prize the most - our church, our native land, our freedom, our hospitals and schools, our courts of law – not to mention our multitudinous automatic gadgetry and sundry gimcracks.

And who among us thinks even these things are perfect and no longer need improving? If we do, we betray our fathers whose disgruntlement enabled us to inherit better things – and we betray our children if we, in turn, are so content that we do not better for them what we have received.

If we become too materially content – too characteristically comfy, too spiritually smug – development – cultural and spiritual, will stop. This is true of our personal development.

Mr. A and Mrs. Z, you were born into this world with a screaming God given ambition, and for some years you yelled like fury when you wanted some improvement in your situation – a bottle refilled – something changed. You may have bothered your parents' sleep and often been a pestiferous little worry wart- you demanded a lot, got in the way, you asked thousands of questions – the same ones over and over again – but as the years passed, your family decided it was all well worth it, for they discovered – lo and behold – you were growing “in wisdom as in stature and (even) in favor with God and man.” Your unwillingness to remain a crying, cooing baby, a romping child, a rebel adolescent – your holy, healthy ambition to move on was paying off in terms of growth – making a man – a woman out of you. You were developing into an adult. You were growing up. Praise God.

And how many of life tragedies begin to develop when a person lacks the ambition to grow up! - so content with the protected, sheltered atmosphere of childhood – that he refuses to take the risks of adult life and grow up. We pity him for he has failed to “put away childish things” – he is content to nurse the status quo – so today he is a forty year old baby – with pouting lips and trembling chin – idle as can be - “Where'd you go?” “Out.” “What'd you do?” “Nothing.” - may have been pleasing in a child, but disgusting in a big fat middle aged baby.

You and I come into this world with certain native abilities – we call them gifts, for these, said Jesus, are talents God gives us. Though some of us appear to be quite [free] of talent – all of us do have some gifts and, says Jesus, we are expected to use them no matter how rich papa is – and most of us worked hard at the start to develop one or two of our little talents – then there came that dangerous crisis – someone petted us – said sweet, nice, lovely things – complemented us – the world discovered us – they gave us a check – a pat on the back – they said we were a good athlete, a BMOC – Duke [dope (?)] – that we had a bright mind – that we had good taste, that we were pretty – had a classic face – that we come

from a great family – that we perform well – on the piano or the piccolo – or were a good cook, lawyer, doctor, teacher, barber, salesman, candlestick maker – whatever and so – too soon satisfied with ourselves – our ambition crumpled up and died – as it expired, it was heard to say, “Look at me, I’m a success, everybody says so. I’m so, so satisfied.” What a pity. For as we begin to relax under them, we start the long road down unaware that if we are not advancing in this life, we’re retreating – that there’s no such thing as standing still – unless you like being a mummy- “mommy’s little mummy likes a pat on the head.”

Let me say especially to our young people – the day someone tells you you are good looking and have a brilliant future ahead – that future is endangered – for it will be treacherously easy for you to sit back under the warm warm glow of that early success and wait for that golden tomorrow to arrive at your door – as though you had nothing to do to make it come true.

Self-satisfaction depletes energy for it destroys interest. It leaves you cold and listless and finally worthless. So respect those people who at 8 or 18 or 48 and 80 – are still angelically ambitious – are fully aware there’s still a great deal they don’t know – that they have plenty of room to grow – that much within them and around them still needs improving – and that at any age under almost any condition, they can add something, if only a smile.

Now certainly, if this is true of worldly things – it is true in the spiritual realm. Happy – said Jesus – are the spiritually ambitious – those, who hunger and thirst – after money? recognition? – no – after the things money can’t buy – after right – right thinking, right feelings, right duty? - for they shall be filled – a spiritual ambition.

Jesus knew that publicans had a better chance to enter the kingdom of God than a spiritually self-satisfied Pharisee because the Pharisee – in spite of his impeccable respectability, his meticulous observance of the niceties of ritual, in spite of his commandment keeping, his tithing all the way down to mint, dill and cummin - his knowledge of scripture down to the last jot and tittle – had a good chance of being damned by his lack of moral

insight. Because he thought he did everything just right, he couldn't see where he did anything wrong.

He did not know that he had anything to learn. Again and again Jesus found the Pharisee unreachable because he was so unteachable.

He trusted in himself that he was righteous – so he was lacking in gratitude. He did not see that his moral relation with others as his spiritual relation with God needed improving – so he was lacking in repentance – no humility.

And as always with the self-righteous, the Pharisee was lacking in love, unloving and unlovely, a despiser of others – including Jesus who had come to save him who refused to believe he needed saving.

The trouble with the Pharisee was that he either rated his attainments too high or set his standards too low – though he wouldn't admit it even if you told him. And if we are self-satisfied, that's our trouble too – we either think we've gone further than we have or we are ignorant of just how much further there is to go. Jesus commands, "be ye therefore perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." This ought to keep us from viewing our achievements too high or placing our standards too low.

At times one runs across a man of dubious character whose rebuttal is "I may not be no good – but at least I ain't no hypocrite " – which, in other words, means: "I haven't gotten anywhere because I'm not trying to go anywhere." He is a person who has escaped the danger of believing his moral and spiritual achievements too high or placing his standards too low by abolishing both. And he's not as rare as you would think.

He's cursed by an unholy and unhealthy contentment – we pity him – for we see his being himself – but we are often like him. When we are not aware of our real need for repentance and forgiveness, that our relations with others and with God do need improving, when we are not striving to deepen our sense of responsibility, to broaden our concern for those who need our help – to serve in small home ways as in great community ways, when we are not aware that there is still much to be done and wide vistas of new thought to develop an interest in, when we give up trying to

advance, we are on the way down and the way out. Jesus said – happy are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness – after right for they shall be filled.