Sunday July 13, 1975

"THE WRONG KIND OF REJOICING" I Corinthians 13:4-7,
James 4:11-12, Romans 12:15

It may seem odd to you to learn that there is such a thing as the "wrong kind of rejoicing." We usually think of rejoicing, being happy, showing joy or pleasure, as something good. And most of the time that's true, but there is also a "wrong kind of rejoicing."

When the Apostle Paul was writing to the church at Corinth, and describing Christian love in all of its aspects, he said among other things, "Love does not rejoice at wrong." Another translation says, "Love does not rejoice in iniquity."

Yet we do often rejoice at wrong or iniquity. Oh, it's not loud boistrous rejoicing, but rather the kind that's more quiet and inward, a secret smile, an appetite for juicy gossip, a strange kind of satisfaction when we hear about someone else doing wrong, or being caught. It's a weird but active hobby for us human beings.

But isn't it odd that we should be happy that sometimes evil gets its way with a person, that good is defeated, that someone has given way to temptation, or that trouble has come into someone's life? That's what we often do; we rejoice, we seem to find a strange kind of happiness when some person has trouble or gets into trouble, and we particularly rejoice when some famous person stumbles.

In fact there are newspapers and magazines sold in grocery stores and on the newstands in other places which make a practice of running stories about famous or well-known people in trouble. And they go to any lengths to uncover such incidents in such person's lives. We all heard this past week about a reporter from the National Enquirer who took Henry Kissinger's garbage no doubt hoping to find some garbage about Kissinger's personal life.

In addition to the National Enquirer, there's a tabloid called "Midnight," another called the "National Star," and the various Hollywood movie magazines. They've found a market in our appetite for rejoicing at wrong.

As research for this sermon, the other day I went into a local grocery store to read the headlines on some of these papers and magazines which specialize in telling us the

dirt in famous people's lives. Here are some of the headlines: JFK's WILD NIGHTS IN THE WHITE HOUSE, THE NAKED TRUTH ABOUT THOSE SWIM PARTIES. SO HUSH-HUSH. . . A HOT NEW BOOK ON SINATRA, and the implication that it tells all sorts of things about him you wouldn't be able to find anywhere else. Another headline read. . ."FORD'S WILD SON KEEPS SECRET AGENTS ON THE HOP." Another headline hinted that NEWMAN'S MARRIAGE IS ON THE ROCKS. And another said, ANITA EKBERG NOW FAT AND LONELY.

We remember the kind of hush-hush whispers when Ted Kennedy's name hit the headlines in connection with the Mary Jo Kopechne tragedy. Or notice the little secret delight that some people feel when it leaks out that some Senator has a drinking problem and was caught with a strip-tease performer.

There's sometimes an extra bonus if some young person caught with drugs came from a parsonage and his friend is the mayor's son. One of these newsheets which specialize in helping us to rejoice at wrong some time ago gave us the big news that Pat Nixon sometimes smoked secretly, but never in public.

The reason that such headlines sell newspapers and magazines is because of our tendency to rejoice in iniquity. It's strange that we should secretly rejoice when some one else, particularly someone well-known or in certain professions, gets into trouble, or gets fat and lonely.

Consider that bizarre sense of satisfaction that grasps us when we catch a person we had always known as having a rigid sense of morals, giving in, or when we hear about a quiet loving person's bursting into a moment of outrage and anger. There is an added "bonus", a negative kind of grace if we can add, "And you know he's on the church council and sings in the choir, or he's been a Sunday School teacher for eleven years.

So the Apostle Paul knew what he was talking about when he said, "Love does not rejoice at wrong!" Yet we do it all the time in very subtle ways. Let someone mention a person's virtue and we can balance it with a vice. We keep our personal C.I.A. file on people active and up-to-date. Let someone make too much of a thing out of what a good mother she is and we'll balance the scales with a casual, "But you know she can't keep house worth a darn."

Talk about what a good father someone is, and we are quick to respond that he can't hold down a good job. If someone praises a person we're a little threatend by or a trifle jealous of, we'll lovingly keep the books balanced with a "yes, but have you seen his backyard or his garage."

All of this is in the category of rejoicing at wrong, and it's the wrong kind of rejoicing, according to the Bible. Jesus Christ was getting at this point in another way in the Sermon on the Mount, when he reminds us, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye." In other words, why do we so easily pick out the wrong in someone else's life? In fact, we even go out of our way looking for it.

When we rejoice at wrong in this way, we are in effect saying, "Thank God sin is universal. I was starting to feel unusually guilty about how rotten I am, but now I don't feel so bad when I see how rotten other people are."

In a sermon entitled, "Action or Reaction," several years ago, I noted that often we have a sort of pulley system for evaluating people and ourselves and it's related to our tendency to rejoice at wrong. On this pulley system, we go up when someone else goes down, and we go down when someone else goes up. Our evaluation of ourselves keeps shifting in relation to what happens to others.

We forget for example, that if I meet a person who preaches better than I do, this does not diminish my own talents. I still have exactly what I had before, no more and no less. That person's gifts do not devalue mine; nor mine devalue someone elses.

Yet many of us rejoice at wrong because we are trying to judge ourselves and others on a false basis. If we meet someone richer, we feel poorer; someone handsomer, we feel uglier, someone more fluent, we feel tongue-tied; if they are up, we are down.

Conversely, many of us cannot feel comfortable unless we are pulling others down, or seeing others pulled down, and that's why we like to read or hear gossip about others--it's that insidious rejoicing at wrong. We seem to think that we rise only by their being brought low. If he is uglier, I am handsomer. If Anita Ekberg is fat and lonely, then I am skinny and not so lonely. If he is failing, then

I am doing better; if he is poorer, then I am richer. But that's not true unless to make him poorer, I am stealing his money.

We're like that older farmer who was moodily regarding the ravages of a flood. "Hiram," yelled a neighbor, "Your pigs were all washed down the creek." "How about Thompson's pigs?" asked the farmer. "They're gone too." "And Larsen's?" "Yes, they're also gone." "Hymph," said the farmer, cheering up, "Taint as bad as I thought."

Deep down we know this is nonsense and gets us nowhere. "Love does not rejoice at wrong." God has not made us or the world so that we improve only at the expense of others going down, or vice versa. If I only feel better when I see someone else who is worse, then that's a very shallow kind of feeling better and it won't carry me very far. We are not made for ourselves, we are made for each other!

It's a sign of weakness within us when we are always comparing ourselves to others in an attempt to obtain self-worth and security. It's like the "I'm O.K, you're not O.K. pattern in transactional analysis, or like the "I'm not O.K., you're not O.K."pattern. A person feels that he isn't O.K. but he thinks he feels better if he can convince himself if you're not O.K., because then at least there's equality.

There's a demonic element in the kind of jealousy that comes from always comparing ourselves to others, and particularly the kind of comparing that can result in rejoicing at wrong to make us feel better.

In another place in the New Testament, Jesus told a parable which illustrates how comparing ourselves to others can make us feel bad and cause trouble. He told about a man who hired people to work in his fields. In the early morning he hired some and made a contract to pay them one dollar for the day's work. They were happy with this. Later in the day, he hired others and made the same contract and very late in the day he did the same with some more workers. At the end of the day when the wages were being paid, those who had worked all day were very jealous of those who worked only part of the day since they were all paid the same. Even though they had been paid according to what they agreed and had been satisfied. It was when they started comparing that jealousy was born.

It's the same with our tendency to rejoice at wrong. We start comparing ourselves with others on a false basis. We see the famous people and are secretly jealous of them. Then when they stumble, we rejoice. "See, they are the same as us," we say. Of course they're the same as the rest of us. They were never any different. That's where we made our mistake.

Furthermore what we forget as Christians is that God does not judge us in comparison with others. God wants to know what we are doing with what we have. We have no need to rejoice at wrong.

What then is the right kind of rejoicing? For the Christian, the Bible tells us, we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

This means putting aside any bitterness and envy. It's not always easy, but the laborers in the parable which Jesus told would then have rejoiced at the good fortune of those who came to work late in the day and received a day's wages instead of being jealous and envious.

The truly happy person is one who can truly rejoice when a friend of theirs or even an enemy is riding the crest of good fortune, instead of sneering, picking flaws and making dire predictions.

"Love does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right!" So as Christians, we are called to the right kind of rejoicing. Practice it this week. Try finding good things in people to rejoice about rather than wrong things. You'll find your whole life changing. Amen.