Book 5

Sunday September 7, 1975

"NEEDED: A HEALTHY CHRISTIAN CYNICISM!" Matthew 5:45,7:15-23

Reinhold Niebuhr, a preacher and theologian who died a few years ago, often told the story of two of his older parishioners in the first church he served in Detroit. One, a millionaire, was utterly convinced that his wealth had come about because he had tithed, given 10% of his income for the work of the church from the time he was a young man. Another member, also in his 70's, who had given interest-free loans and credit to striking workers in a time of wide-spread industrial unrest in the 1930's, died a broken and bankrupt man.

Why was one so conspiciously rewarded and the other so harshly treated when both had done what they thought was God's will?

It's a question that haunts all of us. We know people who have always tried to do what they thought was God's will, tried to live an honest and upright life, and yet suffered all kinds of tragedy in their lives. And then we know others who were also sure they were doing what was right and seemed to prosper.

Most of us have wondered about our own lives in the same way as we have looked at what has happened to us in comparison with others. Even though we know it's impossible to really compare any two persons and what's happened to them, it's difficult to avoid.

What then does the Christian gospel have to say in such situations? It begins with some warnings to all of us.

1. The first warning: Our scripture lessons for today remind us that there are no simple signs to prove that one person has done right and has therefore been rewarded and that another has not and has therefore been punished. "God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust," is the way Jesus said it. Both the good and the evil suffer and are blessed.

I believe that most people seek the good and try to do what is right, and we are to continue to do so. The problem comes when we begin to claim that our modest victories for humankind are God's victories, or that they are proof that God is on our side.

For a person to say or think, "My wealth and prosperity are proof of my righteousness," is dangerous and leads to self-deception. It's like a boxer or football team saying, "We won the match or the game because God is on our side and against the other team."

So we are warned not to use our advantages, our little successes, our victories, our power and our privileges as final proof that we have done God's work and humanity's.

2. A second warning which is a continuation of what we have just said is that we are not to point to material circumstances as the fruits, the signs, the evidence by which human beings are known and judged.

Jesus warns us to beware of false prophets wo come to us in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits!" Superior influence, wealth, prestige and power are not to be taken as the signs, the fruits of our having been annointed for our goodness and the source of our authority to preside over the family, the nation or the world -- in short to rule those within our sight. Remember, God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust.

The fruits of the spirit of God according to the Bible are quite different from what we ordinarily think. What does the Lord require of you? To love mercy, to do justice, to walk humbly. Or in another place we are reminded -- "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

And in the Beatitudes, Jesus also ennumerated those whom God blesses. Blessed are the poor in spirit; Blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; and there is more.

3. A third warning which is implied in our scripture lesson is to beware of those persons or institutions who keep telling us how moral and how good they are. Be skeptical of those who are going to lead us on a moral crusade to root out all evil and moral decay and build a perfect society. Be skeptical of the politician who promises everything and holds himself or herself up as the only righteous person.

The problem with those who are going to root out all evil and vice is that they are always so sure that they themselves

are immune from temptation and evil. They are above it. Thus those who promise law and order are so intent on it that in the process they themselves obstruct justice. We find people using unjust means to obtain justice.

Just because a person says he is leading the moral crusade in God's name does not guarantee anything. As Jesus put it, "Not everyone who says, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven. . . On that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name and do many mighty works in your name? And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from me, you evil-doers." self-deception

We need to keep our eye on the forces that play on us all. We can fight injustice and seek noble goals, but at the same time we can be corrupted by power and zeal in the process, which then breeds new injustices. This is often the dreary path of social change.

Try to name one group of persons or nations which in running the course from victim to victor has not shed some of its virtue along the way -- business, labor, blacks, white ethnics, Roman Catholics, Jews, white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. The crimes committted in the name of justice rival those that arise out of injustice. So beware--any of us can become false prophets. We are never as moral as we claim to be.

Be skeptical in particular when any confrontation or contest is portrayed as a clash between an all-virtuous force, WE, and an evil and demonic enemy -- THEY. It's "we righteous people" against those godless atheistic people. Only when it is too late, when much blood has been spilled, is it discovered that there was virtue on both sides with a considerable admixture of evil.

These warnings we have just looked at are why this sermon is entitled: "Needed: A Healthy Christian Cynicism!"

Usually, the word "cynic" has had only a bad connotation! We think of a cynic as a person who is mocking or sneering, sarcastic, ill-tempered, unbelieving and scornful. And there is that brand of cynicism.

But there is also another kind. Historically, a cynic was a member of a philosophical school in Athens. It was a

group of philosophers who believed virtue to be the only good and who also believed that all of us are motivated by selfishness. Jesus was a kind of cynic in this sense. He was not surprised at the selfishness in human beings. He was not surprised that we human beings also deceive ourselves about our motives. He knew that we many times cover our real intentions with a cloak of false morality or piety.

Jesus was not surprised when Judas betrayed him or that Judas may have convinced himself that he was doing it for a good reason. So there is a place for what we are calling a healthy Christian cynicism, or what Michael Novak calls a "gentle cynicism." It can help us in deciding questions of right and wrong and it can help us in our relationships with others. Here are some of the ingredients and they take into account the warnings mentioned earlier.

1. First, a healthy Christian cynicism is aware that no human forms or institutions are infallible or perfect. Any institution can be corrupted, the CIA, the FBI, the Executive branch of government, a business, a labor union, or the church Thus the healthy cynic is rightly skeptical when any one or any group or institution proclaims that it knows all the answers and does not need to be watched or called to account.

Often speakers of the radical right or left appear to be particularly eloquent and obtain fanatical followers. Why not? They are unrestrained by doubts, hesitations or the absence of facts. They are convinced their theories are true and intend to qualify nothing.

The gentle cynic, on the other hand, is aware of the fact that we tend to look for oversimplified answers and that we need to be on guard.

We Christians need to be especially careful, for William James once observed that the trouble with Christians was they were forever lobbying for special favors in the courts of the almighty. They wanted their prayers answered instantly and precisely in the form and at the time specified. They displayed an all-surpassing vanity in believing that God would intervene to upset the processes of nature in their favor. They expected that the sun would rise and rains fall at their bidding and in their favor.

The healthy Christian cynic, on the other hand, heeds Cromwell's words, "Believe by the bowels of Christ, ye may be wrong."

2. Secondly, the healthy Christian cynic is not surprised by power factors, by selfishness, in human relationships, personal and social. People will take advantage of one another from time to time. Friends will betray us or forget us. Our children will sometimes disappoint us.

When Betty Ford, the President's wife, said in a television interview recently that she would not be surprised if she discovered her daughter was having an affair; I heard her saying something different from what other people told they heard her saying. I saw her being a gentle cynic. I heard her saying in essence, my daughter is a human being like all other people, she could get involved in a love affair like anyone else. The fact that she is the President's daughter does not make her immune. I did not hear Betty Ford endorsing affairs before marriage. I'm convinced she would not be surprised but on the other hand disappointed.

3. Thirdly, as alluded to earlier, like Jesus himself, the healthy Christian cynic is skeptical and uncomfortable with overly moral and pious language and wishes speedily to unmask it. The gentle cynic does not hold that morality is irrelevant or ineffective, only that it has a generous capacity to deceive.

We human beings so deeply desire the good and the moral, that we have to be careful lest we too readily believe we have attained them without much effort. Furthermore, moral and pious language is often used as a club, or a ruse or a cover. Jesus would say, be a bit skeptical of the person who is always ready to lead us on a moral crusade.

4. Fourth, the healthy Christian cynic works for an open kind of tolerance. The gentle cynic recognizes that no action comes completely certified as clear and right. Every proponent and opponent, may in fact and in the light of subsequent history, be partly right and partly wrong or even entirely wrong. So the gentle cynic listens with seriousness to the opposition. No one has a corner on the truth.

Now all of these elements of what we are calling a healthy Christian cynicism do not mean that we take no action or that we make no decisions between right and wrong. Nor does it mean that we are to be overly tolerant of injustice or wrong actions.

It means rather that when we take necessary actions or make needed decisions, we are also aware that we can be mistaken.

It means too that we will not be so quick to say that we have the whole truth.

As Christians, even though we never know the whole truth, we at the same time believe that God's truth sets forth goals toward which we strive but never completely realize and therefore if we try to do our best with the knowledge that we do make mistakes and often must live with them, God understands and forgives. And so we have to power to try again.