Book 5

Sunday November 16, 1975

"HOW TO DOUSE A WARM GLOW!" Luke 19:1-10

There's often a lot of implied theology and good practical advice on Christian living in the daily newspaper. For example, some time ago a column appeared in the Wall Street Journal in which the writer noted that a large part of the trouble with the world are the "yes-butters." What is a yes-butter? You know them. Maybe you are even one of them.

A yes-butter doesn't tell his wife, "I see you got the gas tank filled. That's good." He says, "Yes, I see you got the gas tank filled. Good deal. But did you ask them to fix the turn signals?" She didn't, and her glow has been doused and converted into guilt or anger.

A yes-butter doesn't tell a child, "What a neat trick!" He says, "Yes that's a neat trick. But show me another one." The child has shown the only trick he knows and his pride is instantly converted into a feel of inadequacy.

A yes-butter doesn't tell her married daughter. "This has been such a nice day, I'm glad you could come." She says, "This has been such a nice day. But you really should come to see me more often." The daughter's warm glow has been doused and turned into a vague uneasiness.

A yes-butter says to his child upon seeing the report card, "Yes, those are really good grades, but I hope you will do as well next semester." Or the child shows his grade card to another person and the response is, "Yes, those are good grades, but wait until you get to high school or college, then it's much more difficult to get good grades."

The child wonders, "What's next semester got to do with this grade card, or what's high school or college got to do with it. Why can't I just be recognized for the good job I've done now without someone always bringing up the fact of the good job I've got to do in the future."

Our lives are filled with yes-butters and they know how to douse a warm glow. Recently, I asked a friend of mine, "Did you enjoy that restaurant we told you about?" "Yes," he said, "but we tried another one we liked even better."

Nebraska won the football game against Kansas State, twelve to zero. "Yes, but we should've scored a lot more points," I heard a number of people say. Maybe so, but can't we enjoy the victory just a little bit before we get the "Yes, But."

In countless small ways, the yes-butters are constantly making life, if not miserable, at least less enjoyable for the rest of us. And if we stop to think about it, most of us are yes-butters ourselves. We know how to douse a warm glow.

Sometimes, the yes-butting is done with good intentions. Asking the child to demonstrate another trick, for example. The yes-butter thought he was making the child feel good. How was he to know the youngster didn't know any more tricks?

But there's something deeper involved in our yes-butting, in our dousing of warm glows. Why can't we, the yes-butters simply stop after paying a compliment. "You got the gas tank filled, that's good!" "That's a fine report card, I'm proud of you." Whatever we add afterwards is not helpful. It only goes toward canceling what we've already said.

If the child knows more tricks, he'll show them to us after we praise the first one. And the person I told about that restaurant, I would rather have him sing its praises if he liked it, than hear it called the second best discovery of the week.

What we're really talking about here is being able to accept another person's gift or accomplishment for what it is--accepting it with joy and not demeaning it.

So when the child shows us the trick, we accept that as his accomplishment and leave it there. When Zacchaeus said to Jesus, "Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I will restore it fourfold." Jesus didn't say, "Yes, that fine, but there are a lot of other thing you're going to have to change in your life also, and will you be able to hold to your promise?" Rather Jesus accepted what Zacchaeus said at face value. If other comments were needed there would be time for those later.

The longest journey starts with one step. Zacchaeus was on the right track. In accepting Zacchaeus where he was, Jesus was creating a kind of free space where Zacchaeus could enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Jesus offered him space where change could continue to take place.

Let's go even deeper into this matter of the yes-butter and how to douse a warm glow.

A big part of the problem with many of us is that we have difficulty sympathizing with joy or accomplishment, while we are good at sympathizing with tragedy. I'm told that in the German language the word "sympathy" takes two forms--one form means sympathizing with another person's sorrow; the second form means sympathizing with another person's joy. It's like the Bible says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." To sympathize is to be in harmony with someone else's feelings. But in the English language, we always use the word sympathy to mean, "feeling sorry for." and the opposite sense of rejoicing with those who rejoice is lost.

Furthermore, most of us find it much easier to sympathize with sorrow than to sympathize with joy and accomplishment. We always have a slight feeling of superiority when someone else suffers a tragedy, and it makes us feel good to feel bad about it.

But when someone we know is rejoicing, has gotten a promotion, is radiant, is successful, how much sympathy then do we feel? Are we able to harmonize our emotions with theirs, or do we rather feel a pang of bitterness and envy?

I know a good many unpleasant people who are eager to sympathize with disaster; in fact, some of them spend a lifetime in looking for disaster to sympathize with. When however a friend of theirs is riding the crest of good fortune, these unpleasant characters are totally unable to sympathize. Instead they sneer, they pick flaws, they say, "yes, but," and make dire predictions. They know how to douse a warm glow.

Jesus knew that it takes no great moral or spiritual qualities to feel sorry for a person who has fallen from a tremendous height, or has suffered an irreplaceable loss.

We can easily put ourselves in his place and feel sorrow for ourselves in a vicarious fashion.

However, a genuinely sympathetic person is a rare and wonderful creature. That person not only mourns when we mourn, but rejoices when we rejoice. He or she is able to identify with us in happiness as well as in misfortune, and does not say, "yes, but."

Many people delude themselves that they are warm and sympathetic because they cry easily over the death of small children or animals or miners trapped in a slide. Julius Streicher, one of the most cruel of the Nazi leaders, used to weep openly when one of his pet canaries died. But he had no problem in killing millions of human beings.

The true test of a sympathetic nature, however, comes when a friend or enemy or neighbor or colleague at work has good fortune, gets a raise in salary equal to yours or higher, or gets a promotion. Then we are not quite so sympathetic. Then we look for the world to turn, for reverses to set in, even for tragedy to strike--so that we can again sympathize with that person, on our own terms.

Lest we be misled, there is a time and place for saying, "Yes, but, have you considered this." There are some false kinds of warm glows that need to be doused.

At times, all of us need people who know how and when to break in with--"That's not so," or "You're deluding yourself." Jesus knew how to puncture the puffed-up righteousness of the people of his day; he could point out the inconsistencies in their reasoning.

We all need that at times. Recently, I overheard the following conversation. One of the persons was saying with a warm glow--"Too much government. We mustn't let the government get so strong and powerful. It's a menace to our liberties." "Quite right," his friend agreed. "It worries me the way the government is shaping our whole economy toward defense. It is the biggest business of all." "I don't mean that,"said the first person, "we've got to have a strong government in the matter of defense."

"Well then,"his friend said,"If you're concerned about big government being a menace to our liberties, you no doubt have been worried about the CIA and the FBI in their

domestic spying and phone tapping of U.S. citizens." "O no," the first man said again, "You can never tell where our enemies might be. The government needs to get tough."

Then there's often labor trouble," his friend continued, "Strikes that really hurt the public and tie up the whole economy for weeks or months. But I suppose that's the price we have to pay for the kind of limited government you are in favor of." "No," the first man said again, "The country shouldn't allow those things. We ought to force those labor blighters to negotiate. Get an injunction. Haul them into the courts. Do whatever necessary."

"And what about government subsidies? I suppose you are against the government supports." "Certainly," the first man said again, "It takes too much government and too much of our tax money." "Then of course you were against the government bailing out the Lockheed Corporation and against subsidies to agriculture." "O no,"said the first man again, "That's an entirely different situation."

"Well, you certainly have thought things out carefully," the second man said. "There's no doubt in my mind that we have too much government. And I'm glad to know there are people like you around who are battling so valiantly against it.

Jesus might've been more blunt. But we all need people who show up our hypocrisy. That's what Jesus was doing when he said to those about to stone the woman who had been caught in adultery, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone." He doused the self-righteous warm glow.

What then is the answer so that we do not douse those honest warm glows and are able to sympathize with those who rejoice and yet at the right time be able to know when to say, Yes, but?

It's a matter of learning the art of when to come in--when to speak and when to stop. Musicians in an orchestra learn the art of coming in at the right time. One musician said that the person who can rest for 74 measures as the composer Haydn expects the flutes to do in one pice and then come in correctly on the upbeat of the 75th measure, is a person of high quality. That person has to have the art of coming in at exactly the right time with the right note.

It's a good thing to practice for all of us. One of the fine points of this art of coming in is also to know when to stay out. Sometimes we have to pipe down. There isn't any music for us to play. We have to lay aside the big tuba we like so well. Don't blow a blast on it. It could douse a warm glow that need not be doused.

So there you have it. Nothing particularly profound, but hopefully just sound practical advice on everyday living as a Christian. Often in personal relations we need to wait for our cue to come in, just like a musician, and then have the right note--most of us yes-butters have too many notes and sometimes we ruin the music. Amen.