Book 32

Sunday June 2, 1996

THE PERILS OF EMPTINESS Matthew 12:43-45

A few months ago, a father wrote an article about his son which appeared in the editorial section of the Wall Street Journal. Here's part of what he said:

"It's six a.m. as I write this, and I'm looking into my 17- year old son's room. David is not there, having stayed out all night again. He doesn't work and he doesn't really go to school. This is not to say that David doesn't engage in commercial activity. Once when he brought his products home, we called the cops. They talked to him, took them away, and said they would prosecute in a year, after they test to see if they are what they look and smell like.

Not that I think prosecuting would have done anything. The last time he was arrested, he was carrying all the gang's dope because at age 16 he's allowed to go on school grounds (even though he's not a student), and he wouldn't have been subject to the stiff penalties his colleagues would have been up against.

This is not to suggest that David is interested only in amateur pharmaceutics. His resume includes some pretty nasty would-be class A felonies too.

Is this South Central L.A.? It's south central Both-ell--a nice suburban area north of Seattle. Am I an uneducated welfare parent? An angry white male? Hardly. My wife and I provide a full-serv-ice two parent home. I have a graduate degree

and I'm gainfully employed. We provide all our children with books, bikes, baseball, soccer and martial arts. All the same, David has not attended school regularly since the 9th grade. But he's a bright guy--he tests at grade level without going to class. And he can talk rings around psychologists, counselors, parole officers and social workers.

When people ask me why I don't do something, I can only respond: 'What do you suggest?' Should I ground him? A spanking? He's almost as big as I am and he has bigger friends. Besides, I don't think a borderline violent response even if I could deliver it, sends the right message.

One more thing, his girlfriend is pregnant. When David's own child is born, he will be 17 1/2."

It's a sad story with no simple solution. Yet there's something missing from this picture as the father describes family life. The dad mentioned all the things which as parents they had provided for their son and other children-- books, bikes, baseball, soccer, and martial arts. But he didn't make any reference to attending church together or any other efforts at trying to instill a knowledge of right and wrong, integrity and a sense of personal responsibility in their children.

There's a new book out written by Stephen Carter, who teaches at Yale Law School. The title is, INTEGRITY. Mr. Carter has written an earlier book, called THE CULTURE OF DISBELIEF. In his new book, he describes his first lesson in integrity. He was in the first grade at P.S. 129 in Harlem. "The teacher had us all sitting in a circle,

playing a game in which each child would take a turn donning a blindfold and then trying to identify objects by touch alone as she handed them to us. If you guessed right you stayed in the next round. If you guessed wrong, you were out. I survived almost to the end, amazing the class with my abilities. Then to my dismay, the teacher realized what I had known and relied on from the start: my blindfold was tied imperfectly and a sliver of bright reality leaked in from the outside. By holding the unknown object in my lap instead of out in front of me, as most of the other children did, I could see at least a corner or a side and sometimes more--but always enough to figure out what it was. So my remarkable success was due only to my ability to break the rules.

Fortunately for my own moral development, I was caught. And as a result of being caught, I suffered in front of my classmates, a humiliating reminder of right and wrong: I had cheated at the game. Cheating was wrong.

I do not remember many of the details of the public lecture that I received from my teacher. I do remember that I felt terribly ashamed. I also know that the shame was sufficiently intense so that it has stayed with me ever since. And as I grew older, whenever I was even tempted to cheat--at a game, on homework--I would remember my teacher's stern face and the humiliation of sitting before my classmates, revealed to the world as a cheater."

Unfortunately, there are many people who if

caught cheating at that age or later in life would-'ve felt no shame, no humiliation. Why? Because they had not learned a sense of right and wrong nor had they seen integrity modeled by their parents and peers. Stephen Carter was raised in a deeply religious home where church participation was expected and not participating was not an option.

In his book, Carter goes on to make the point that in our culture we care far more about winning than playing by the rules.

It reminded me of another news story which appeared earlier. It was the report of a major research project carried on over a period of years.

According to the results of this research, parents

who want their children to gain a sense of integrity would do well to lead by example, attending church as a family and basing their lives on deep religious principles.

Students interviewed in universities reported perceiving hypocrisy in parents who attend church only on certain holidays or when convenient for them or on such occasions as weddings or funerals. The young people interviewed noticed a lack of discipline and commitment in the lives of their parents as far as their religious faith is concerned. They saw their parents as viewing their religious faith as a kind of leisure time activity in competition with other leisure time choices. In this competition, regular and sustained participation in church life often came in second or third or fourth. It was something to do when

there was nothing else to do.

As I read the father's sad story in the Wall Street Journal and the results of this research in another story, it reminded me of a parable which Jesus told as reported in the Gospel of Matthew.

"There was this individual," said Jesus, "who drove an evil spirit out of his life, something like a bad habit perhaps, but this same individual left her life empty in the same way that one cleans out a house and leaves it empty and she was pleased with the emptiness. Not long after, this same evil spirit was looking for a place to live and seeing his former residence empty and clean, he went and brought seven of his favorite devil friends to live there with him." And said Jesus, "the last state of that person became worse than the first."

It's a story about the perils of emptiness. In the research I mentioned earlier, many children and young people do not follow in the footsteps of the faith of their parents because their parents lives are empty and so their children's lives are empty as well. There's no spiritual foundation on which to build integrity.

And there are other times when emptiness takes place because of our conscious decisions. Over and over again I've heard parents with good intentions say, "We're not going to indoctrinate our children with any religious beliefs. Let them grow up and decide for themselves." In other words, we're going to allow that important part of their life to be empty. But emptiness is danger-ous. When that is done, the parents should not be surprised when some unwelcome beliefs and

values fill that empty space. If hungry people are not fed good nourishing healthy food, they will eat whatever else is available.

Emptiness is dangerous. This basic life principle taught by Jesus applies to all parts of our living. If you're going on a vacation and leave your house empty while you are gone, it's best to make it seem as if your house is occupied. Remember to stop the delivery of the newspaper and other kinds of deliveries as well. Don't let there be evidence even to the casual observor that the house is empty. It's helpful to have an automatic timer that will turn on some of the lights in the evening so as to give the impression that the house is occupied. Why? Because an empty house like an empty life invites all sorts of unwelcome people and corrupt idea.

In our human life, there's a peril in emptiness because of our innate need to have the approval of other people, to be accepted by others, to be a part of a group. That can be a good thing if it means we belong to a church, or some other kind of group which is organized for doing good in the world, the kind of group which builds strong character and gives us the courage to resist evil. But it can be a bad thing if it leads to being part of a group that pulls us down, that leads us into doing things we know are wrong. Why do youth gangs come into being? Because of the emptiness and because of the need to belong. When that emptiness is filled in this way, the young people do not have the courage, the conscience and the character to resist when the gang gets into illegal activity.

An empty life, an empty faith, a spiritual vacuum are all invitations to trouble. It is not enough to know what a person does not believe unless that person also knows what he or she does believe. Thus the only way to counteract the perils of emptiness is to be continually filling your life with solid trustworthy principles which govern your decisions.

What are some of the ways you do this? It means such activities as building good human relationships with people who will bring things which are positive and constructive to that relationship. It means choosing friends to whom you can turn when you need the love and suppport of someone else because tradegy or temptation comes into your life and you feel empty. It means being an active member of a community

of faith which is supportive and forgiving. It means testing your decisions to be sure you are not making them on the basis of your emotional feelings of the moment rather than on solid tested ethical principles which grow out of your Christian faith.

You can ask yourself such questions as: if you have children, when your children grow up, is what you are thinking about doing something you would want them to do? Do you believe that after you do this thing, you would admire yourself?

The point is there is a person of integrity hiding somewhere inside of you and sometimes you need the right questions or the right kind of thinking to help you discover it. I believe you have an

ample supply of good character qualities but often they are hidden and need to be uncovered.

Remember above all, one purpose of your Christian faith is to help you maintain personal integrity even in the face of external insult, disappointment, rejection or hurt. That's because your Christian faith teaches that the deepest joy in life comes from doing "right" in spite of the reaction of others. Because you have been created by God, you have the promise of God that you do have the capacity to rise above circumstance and attain mastery over your weaker self. God is ready and able to fill any and all emptiness you have. And if it is filled by God your supply of integrity will never run out. Amen.