Book 34

Sunday August 31, 1997

LIVING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Mark 7:1-9, 14-15, 21-23

In the movie, THE GODFATHER, there's a scene near the end that I've never forgotten. The Corleone family, a powerful Mafia group that makes deals you can't refuse, is shown attending a church service. It's a service of baptism and Holy Communion and it's all very religious and liturgical. While the family is shown involved in these church rituals, we are intermittenly shown scenes of the family's "hit-men" shooting and strangling people to death.

The whole scene is meant to reveal the hypocrisy of this religious family. They perform the outward

signs of faith, but inwardly are unclean and corrupted. The contradiction between what is said and claimed, between what is affirmed in faith and what is practiced in daily life is enormous.

This is not to deny that religious traditions and practices, liturgies and rituals, what you do on the outside with your bodies, can be very important in your life. For example, folding your hands together and closing your eyes while you pray can aid you in your concentration. You are not so easily distracted. Some prefer to kneel when praying because it is a position of humility and vulnerabililty. The early Congregationalists in New England in the 1600's had a tradition of standing with arms raised and eyes open while praying. It symbolized for them a position of openness to God and God's will in their lives.

Yet deep down we all know that whatever physical position we assume for prayer on the outside is not as crucial as what is going on inside our minds and hearts and what we do with our lives on a daily basis. You can appear very pious on the outside like the Corleone family, go through all the proper motions and yet be quite the opposite on the inside. You can be sure that God is not paying attention to your outside piety but rather to your inside sincerity and attitude. Are you self-righteous? Are you humble? Are you grateful? Are you forgiving of others? Are you open to hearing God's will for your life?

In spite of this there have always been those among us who seem to emphasize living from the outside more than living from the inside. They are quick to criticize any deviation from

proper religious tradition or practice. It has been said that such people have a blindness to the big with a keen eye for the little. It's not a new issue.One day some of the very religious leaders in Jesus' time noticed that his disciples did not properly wash their hands before eating. Over the years the Hebrew people had developed some rather elaborate religious rituals to help remind them of God's goodness and this ceremonial handwashing before and after eating was one of them. The purpose was not only cleanliness but consecration. It was to remind them that every meal was an occasion for thanksgiving since food is a gift from God and that meals can be a time for religious fellowship. The ceremonial washing of hands could be a good and helpful ceremony.

However like many religious practices, it could also become an empty form, a rigid regulation used to evaluate an individual's piety. Furthermore, it was one of those relatively new Scribal-Pharisaic regulations which worked a hardship upon the ordinary rank and file of working people who had little leisure time for the observance of the detailed rules of religion laid down by the authorities.

In every day and age, one way to show your power over others is to set up a whole list of rules and then do your best to make all people obey them to the letter. These religious authorities judged people from the outside. Were they following all rules and regulations exactly as they had been proscribed by them?

This judging of people by what they do on the outside has come down through the years and is still with us, especially in the field of religion, although other areas of life are not immune as we shall see. Jesus, on the other hand emphasized that we are to live from the inside out.

Some years back, a couple with two children said they wanted to join this church and their two teen-age daughters also wanted to become members. Their mother, however, had a question that had been bothering her for years. She said that her first daughter had been baptized as an infant in a church service, but that her second daughter had not been baptized in a formal way, yet she had been baptized in an unusual manner. I asked her to explain. She said that when this daughter was a baby only a few weeks old, she

had become very ill, so much so that one night she feared her daughter would die. That night, she had been cradling the child in her arms in a rocking chair and her tears flowed freely. She said, "I took some of those tears and baptized my baby." I assured her that from my perspective her daughter had been baptized and I was sure that from God's perspective she was also.

A few months later I came across another story involving the outside form of baptism versus the inside meaning. The elders of a congregation which believes that only baptism by immerson is valid, discovered some awkward information about their new minister's wife. She was a de- vout and Christ- centered person, but she had entered the denomination through the back door by joining a congregation that allowed her to

transfer her membership even though her baptism was by sprinkling as a baby. The particular congregation of which her husband was now the minister was not that open-minded. They had always required "believer's baptism" by immersion even of those individuals who joined their church and who had been previously baptized by sprinkling as a baby.

The minister's wife had been member of their congregation now for three years and they had only recently found out that she had never been baptized by immersion. What are they going to do? What would Jesus say with his emphasis on living from the inside out?

Emphasizing too much the outward forms and rules can sometimes blind us to the inward spirit.

That's what Jesus was talking about over and over again. He always looked past the outside appearance of a person to the inside. He was not too concerned with whether or not an individual was performing the religious rituals exactly as the religious authorities proscribed.

He said to the religious critics of his day, "There is nothing outside a person that by going in can defile, but the things that come out are what defile...For it is from within, from the human heart, that evil intentions come." It is also from within, the inner person, that good intentions come. It is the inward person that needs to be changed.

This is a message that needs to be heard especially in our time, not only in our religious life, but in the larger world as well where there is so much

emphasis on "image" or "personality" rather than on inner character and principles which form the inner person.

A scholar who has studied the past 200 years of writing about success says that he discovered a startling pattern in this literature. His conclusion is that most of the success literature in the past 50 years is superficial. It is filled with social image-consciousness, techniques and quick fixes. In stark contrast, almost all the literature in the first 150 years focused on what could be called the "character ethic" as the foundation of success--things like integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, justice patience and simplicity. The first 150 years is the story of efforts to integrate certain principles and habits deep within our nature. But he claims that shortly after World War II, the

basic view of success shifted from the "character ethic" to what he calls the "personality ethic." Success became more a function of personality, of public image, of skills and techniques.

We've all read about the ups and downs of Donald Trump. According to what I've read, Trump valued publicity and image more than sound finance and because of the publicity and image he created, many banks and other financial institutions were eager to lend him money.

A few years ago, Prentic Hall Press published a book with the title, THE DAY AMERICA TOLD THE TRUTH. It featured the result of surveys of the American people. Subtitled "What people really believe about everything that matters," the book is supposed to give us a truthful look at

what Americans are really all about.

In one of the surveys, the authors asked people what they might change about themselves and how they might fulfill their potential as human beings. I expected the most common answers would be statements like, "I would be a better person." "I would try to do more for others." "I would try to make a difference in the world." "I would invest my money and my time in things that have lasting results." But none of these answers were given.

THE DAY AMERICA TOLD THE TRUTH is not a religious book, but even the authors were shocked at the answers. "Better person" didn't even finish in the rankings. People across the country showed much less interest in changing

their inner selves, than they did in changing their outward appearances of weight, body, hair, face and age. The top two answers were: I want to be rich. I want to be thin.

When I read the result of these surveys I wasn't surprised. Many of the personality and public image emphases of the past few years have encouraged people to be more concerned about their outside rather than their inside. They have stressed using techniques to get other people to like them, or to fake interest in the hobbies of others to get out of them what they wanted, or to use the "power look," or wear the "power necktie" or how to arrange the "power lunch." Books have been written on how to intimidate your way through life. The emphasis has been on quick-fix influence techniques, and power strategies.

This is not to say that some elements of the personality ethic, personality growth, communication skill training are not beneficial. They can be very helpful. But there are secondary, not primary traits. If I use human influence strategies and tactics to get other people to do what I want, to work better, to be more motivated, to like me and each other while at the same time my character is fundamentally flawed, marked by duplicity and insincerity, then in the long run I have failed.

My duplicity will breed distrust and everything I do--even using so-called good human relations techniques, will be perceived as manipulative. Basic inner goodness is necessary. The Psalmist wrote, "Search your own heart with all diligence for out of it flow the issues of life." Life is best lived from the inside out. It is character that

communicates most eloquently. Emerson said, "What you are shouts so loudly in my ears that I cannot hear what you say."

It's no surprise that many people in our time have outside success but an inner hunger. They are empty inside. They have not paid enough attention to their inner life--their spiritual life, their basic character.

Jesus knew and taught that there are some basic principles which govern human growth and interaction--principles which are woven into the fabric of every civilized society throughout history and which make up the roots of every family and institution that has endured and prospered. They are in the deepest sense given to us by God. These principles are a part of every major endur-

ing religion. We build human character on the inside when we make these principles a part of our everyday life.

Here's a partial list of these principles which are the foundation of living from the inside out.

The principle of fairness, out of which our whole concept of equity and justice is developed.

Other basic principles include integrity and honesty. Another is human dignity and worth. Another is service, the idea of making a contribution for the good of society. Another is mercy. "What does God require of you but to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" Micah 6:8

Another principle is quality or excellence. There

is also the principle of potential, the idea that we can grow and develop and release more and more potential. Life is not static.

What are some others which you would add to the list? It's a good topic for a family discussion. Principles are guidelines for human conduct that are proven to have enduring permanent value. They're fundamental. One way to understand the self-evident nature of these basic principles is consider the absurdity of attempting to live an effective life based on their opposites.

Would you want to live in a society or community where unfairness, deceit, dishonesty, useless-ness, mediocrity and degeneration were the basic principles on which that society was built?

I believe God is the source of the correct basic principles which are the foundation of our life together. They are gifts from God to guide us to a peaceful life together. That's why Jesus taught that having the right inside is more important than having the right outside.

When we begin to live our lives on the basis of these principles from the inside out, then God's power is released within our nature and we begin to fufill the purpose of our creation. Amen.