

GAINS AND LOSSES

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Every person must look to his economic well-being. We owe it to ourselves to be self-reliant. But doing the best we can should not be limited to economics alone. In the relatively near future, many of you will be starting your own families. It would be good, right now, to look back on your own youth, still clear in your memory, and ask yourself whether you want to raise your children with every material advantage.

We live in a marvelous society which has an economic system which is the wonder of the earth. Those of you who do even moderately well will be able to provide your children

with food, clothing, medical care, and material comforts which most of the people in this world cannot even dream of. Some of you may attain such wealth that you will be able to give your children anything their hearts' desire.

But should you? Think back on your own childhood, and ask whether you would have been well served if your parents had responded to your every wish.

We live too much in a world of gains and losses -- material gains and spiritual losses. Too often, the time we spend striving after possessions is time wasted from the point of view of our spiritual growth. Consider the words of Emerson, who put it this way: "For every thing you have missed, you have gained something else; and for every thing you gain, you lose something else."

Think about those words. No doubt you have missed things in your lives which you really wanted. Yet you probably gained by the experience -- gained patience, gained self-respect, gained discipline. And remember, for the years ahead, that if you dedicate your lives to material gain, you may lose much more important things. You may lose wisdom and understanding.

In every life, there comes a day of reckoning. Consider what the Bible has to teach by the Book of Job. Job was a man more blessed with wealth than anyone in his country. He had children he loved, a beautiful home, farmland and fat livestock.

And even though Job was a man who loved God and respected the traditions of his religion, he had to face that day of reckoning. His children were killed, and everything he owned was reduced to ashes.

More than once, other men have been made to cry out after a life of great material success -- to cry out, just as Job cried out, "But where shall wisdom be found? and where is the place of understanding?"

Wisdom and understanding are not to be bought in the marketplace. The price of wisdom is not money, and you cannot buy it even if you become a millionaire sitting behind the biggest desk, in the fanciest office, in the tallest skyscraper in town.

If success is to be measured in fame, why did the actor Freddie Prinz kill himself just a year ago, at the height of his popularity? If success is to be measured by promotion and rank, why did Admiral James Forrestal throw himself out the window of the Bethesda Naval Hospital after a brilliant

military career?

Here is what Job said of wisdom and understanding, as he sat in sackcloth and ashes:

It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof.

It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir, with the precious onyx, or the sapphire.

The gold and the crystal cannot equal it: and the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold.

No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls: for the price of wisdom is above rubies.

The topaz of Ethiopia shall not equal it, neither shall it be valued with pure gold.

Jesus himself took up this theme. In the Sermon on the Mount, he counseled his followers in this way:

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth,
Where moth and rust doth corrupt,
And where thieves break through and steal:

But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven,
Where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt,
And where thieves do not break through nor steal.

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

What does this last line mean? "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." It means that what we really concentrate on is liable to take over our lives. It means that if we concentrate on worldly treasures, we will have no room left in our hearts for more important things.

It is just as J. M. Barrie said many years ago, speaking to a society he saw as becoming more and more materialistic. "One's religion," Barrie said, "is whatever he is most interested in -- and yours is Success."

If we make a religion of success, we are not likely to do it consciously. Nobody is going to say, out loud, that what he is most interested in, what he makes a religion of, is money. Yet we do it, unconsciously, habitually. By

concentrating on making a better living than the next fellow, we get in the unconscious habit of making a religion out of financial success.

In so doing, we undermine the very happiness we seek.

The psychologist William James spoke in 1890 of the unconscious, habitual nature of this process, and of its results. James said, "The hell to be endured hereafter, of which theology tells, is no worse than the hell we make for ourselves in this world by habitually fashioning our characters in the wrong way."

How is character fashioned when we pursue economic success with religious fervor? A person falls into this trap by forgetting the wisdom of the spiritual traditions we all have available to us. He ignores the needs of his community, and fails to see that each need is an opportunity for action,

growth, and personal satisfaction. He focuses narrowly on his job, and his possessions, stripping away every other interest. Eventually, this makes a hell of his life.

Eventually, he finds he is estranged from his family, his community, and his own better nature. At that point, he will find he has somehow missed the point -- that his life has no meaning, and that the taste of success is bitter on the tongue. It is then that he is liable to wonder, in the confusion of his existence, "where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding?"

The witness of human experience is persuasive. Materialism cannot bring you happiness. As Emerson put it, in his essay on Self-Reliance, "Nothing can bring you peace but yourself." If you would have peace of mind, the responsibility is affirmatively

your own. The habits of character-building James mentioned are up to you, for good or ill.

Let me talk about three habits which are constructive of happiness.

The first is economic moderation. After so many years of prosperity, we have come to expect creature comforts almost as a matter of right. To obtain what we want, or think we want, we are too willing to go deeply into debt. Yet, as people discover all the time, there is nothing so miserable as a credit-card lifestyle. Living beyond your means will surely drive a wedge between you and real enjoyment of life. And even the possessions you get by carrying the weight of debt will lose their attractiveness. Debt is a distraction from all you would really enjoy.

The second thing which contributes to personal happiness is involvement with the community. Soon, you will enter into the adult world. All the institutions built by those coming before you will be delivered into your hands. You will have stewardship for your local government, your churches, the school system which you have just come through. You will have stewardship for these things all your adult lives, and will have the choice of leaving them better, or worse, than you found them.

People are not made to live in isolation. No man can go into his own house, and shut the door, without stagnating personally and leaving the needs of his town unmet.

But a strange thing happens when people get involved in the civic clubs and volunteer groups of their own hometowns. They, themselves, benefit. There is much to be done. Begin by

discovering that right in your own community there are people with real trouble. It may be the trouble of poverty, or of ill health. You will find young people poised uncertainly between the choices of delinquency and healthy lives. You will find old people shut up in nursing homes, cut off from their families and the main current of life. You will find handicapped and disabled people ready and willing to become productive, self-supporting citizens, if only someone can give them the little bit of help to get started.

The great, problematic world is waiting for your effort. Yet, when you give yourself to this world, you will be the real beneficiary. You will find real pride and satisfaction in being of use to those who need you. There are no sleepless nights for the useful, active person, no matter how baffling

the problem you are attacking. By your own personal action, take on the troubles of the world. And you will find there is cause for optimism. You can have effect. You can do something, even in the face of problems which seem too huge for solution. And your life will be energized by the attempt, in contrast with the drained life of one who thinks all he needs to worry about is a job, a house, two cars and a boat.

The final source of human happiness is spirituality. That is an old-fashioned term, in these days of rampant materialism, but it is a word which needs to be brought back into use. Each and every one of us has a spiritual potential. We will develop it, consciously, actively, over all the years, or we will let it die. The person who loses that potential is half-dead, even in the midst of life. To ignore that side of ourselves is

akin to suffering an amputation, cutting away a part of our selves.

Spiritual development does not happen without effort and study. Look to your religious roots. No one can predict what will happen to you in your life. To be sure, you will suffer some misfortune. But you will find that the religious tradition available to you is the distilled experience of all of human life. In time of misfortune, the wisdom of the ages can speak to you through religion. But do not wait for misfortune to strike. If you are a Christian, you have an affirmative responsibility to study the principles of your religion, to know them, and to carry them through all that you do. We talk of preserving our natural resources these days, and of improving our environment. But religious principles are nothing more than

the natural resources of the just person. We have to improve the quality of our moral environment, as well.

Abraham Lincoln once said that war is too important to be left to the generals. Religion is also too important -- too important to each of us personally -- to be left to the ministers. Yet, we want to leave religion to the experts, and perhaps go to church now and then to hear a sermon. But that cannot really help us, personally. Religion is like the cool water of a well. A man can go and sit by the well, but unless he drinks of the water, he will never be refreshed. We have to know our religion, know its history and its teachings, and practice it as laymen every day.

Make religion a constant force in your lives. The truly happy person is the one who has discovered that spiritual

force is stronger than any material force in the world.

Remember the words of Job: "Where is the place of understanding?"

Remember that it is in religion itself. Therein lies the peace

that passeth understanding.