

SUNDAY OCTOBER 3, 2010

## GETTING BACK TO WORK

There was a bright young man who was a sophomore Stanford pre-med student. To reward him for having done so well in school, his parents gave him a trip to the Far East for the summer vacation before the start of his junior year. While there he met a guru who said to him, "Don't you see how you are poisoning your soul with this success oriented way of life? Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend. Your idea of a good marriage is not to find the woman who will make you whole, but to win the girl that everyone else wants. That's not how people are supposed to live. Give it up; come join us in an atmosphere where we all share and love each other." The young man had completed four years at a competitive high school to get into Stanford, plus two years of pre-med courses at the university. He was ripe for this sort of approach. He called his parents from Tokyo and told them he would not be coming home. He was dropping out of school to live in an ashram.

Six months later, his parents got a letter from him: "Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren't happy with the decision I made last summer, but I want to tell you how happy it has made me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, and no trying to get ahead of anyone else. Here we are all equal, and we all share. This way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I've become the number two disciple in the entire ashram, and I think I can be number one by June!"

They say that all good humor must contain one crucial element: Truth. And how true is this story. The young man's intentions are noble but he is not able to follow through. Before long he is competing in his monastery to be the star pupil. Our parents and grandparents have long observed that loyalty, service, and sacrifice no longer characterize our workforce, and our families. ~~What Tom Brokaw has called~~ "The Greatest Generation" grew up facing great economic challenges and then the trials of war and cold war. But I have noticed in the past months a renewed gratitude, an appreciation for all we have. We see ourselves more clearly. We are not a people who have limitless rights. We are citizens who have a duty to serve. We are not a people who should demand service. We are a nation which owes others for their sacrifice. This is the lesson Jesus would have us learn. It is the meaning of this short parable and it is the standard for every Christian. This parable assumes two basic principles, two inescapable conclusions of Christianity.

The first is GOD OWES US NOTHING. If it is true that God owes us nothing, we understand why self-righteousness is such a loathsome attitude for religious people. Self righteousness assumes we are due God's blessings and grace because of our good behavior. Let's take a look at this short parable that teaches us to avoid this attitude.

Jesus asks you to imagine you are the owner of a farm with slaves. When the slave's work is done for the day and he comes in from the field, are you going to wait on him? Help him recline at the table? Prepare his meal? Serve his supper? I don't think so. You say "get the meal ready and wait on me while I eat and drink and when I am done then you can eat."

Jesus drives home his point. The master is under no obligation to say thank you to the slave. Why? Because the slave was simply doing his job. It is what is expected of him. The servant is not worthy to receive any compliments when he does what he is expected to do. It is a message that flies in the face of our need to be recognized.

Does that mean we should not honor those who do good works? Not at all. It simply means it is our duty to work in the kingdom of God and we are due nothing for that work. First and foremost we live for God expecting nothing in return.

And secondly, WE OWE GOD EVERYTHING. I love the story about a young boy by the name of James who had a desire to be the most famous manufacturer and salesman of cheese in the world. He planned on becoming rich and famous by making and selling cheese and began with a little buggy pulled by a pony named Paddy. After making his cheese, he would load his wagon and he and Paddy would drive down the streets of Chicago to sell the cheese. As the months passed, the young boy began to despair because he wasn't making any money, in spite of his long hours and hard work.

One day he pulled his pony to a stop and began to talk to him. He said, "Paddy, there is something wrong. We are not doing it right. I am afraid we have things turned around and our priorities are not where they ought to be. Maybe we ought to serve God and place him first in our lives." The boy drove home and made a covenant that for the rest of his life he would first serve God and then would work as God directed.

Many years after this, the young boy, now a man, stood as Sunday School Superintendent at North Shore Baptist Church in Chicago and said, "I would rather be a layman in the North Shore Baptist Church than to head the greatest corporation in America. My first job is serving Jesus."

So, every time you take a bite of Philadelphia Cream cheese, sip a cup of Maxwell House coffee, mix a quart of Kool-Aid, slice up a DiGiorno pizza, cook a pot of Macaroni&Cheese, spread some Grey Poupon, stir a bowl of Cream of Wheat, slurp down some Jell-o, eat the cream out of the middle of an Oreo cookie, or serve some Stove Top stuffing, remember a boy, his pony named Paddy and the promise little James L. Kraft made to serve God and work as he directed.

James Kraft understood that it is our faith in God that reminds us on a daily basis that we are servants in this world. It is easy in times of plenty to forget. When all is right with the world, the law of

averages predicts that all will be wrong with us. When we cease to feel anything less than AWE at the wonder of creation...and when we feel that GOD the Father has human instead of divine attributes... when we think of God framed by the perspective of our puny experiences... then we forget that we are God's creatures. What do we have as a claim upon God except to understand our duty to yearn for God's love? What do we have ultimately without God's grace?

Religion, true religion that has Christ as our Lord and God as our father will tap us on the shoulder and say, "I am hungry, prepare my meal. I am thirsty, get my drink." We have the option then to serve or spend our lives expecting to be served. Hopefully we can keep ourselves in right relationship and choose the former because we are unworthy servants. God owes us nothing. And, as we continue to do our duty, we owe God everything.