

Great Southern Preaching

Vital Christianity as Interpreted by the Sermons of Some of the Leading Contemporary Exponents of the Gospel Message in the Southern States

Edited by
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With an Invocation by
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TO YOUNG MEN
AND
YOUNG WOMEN
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CHARACTER BUILDING IN THE HOME

James I. Vance

"If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved." Genesis xliii. 14.

The patriarch means that bereavement has sounded its deepest depths, hope has gone bankrupt, happiness is in ruins, the zero hour of calamity and sorrow has been reached: "If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved."

The message here is a timely one. I, for one, feel that many of our troubles to-day, the increase in crime, the widespread lawlessness, the mad rush for pleasure, the sagging of ideals, the desecration of the marriage vow, are traceable in whole or in part to the collapse of the home.

The text is the cry of Jacob for his sons. It is a line from the Jew's folk story of home. That does not mean that the story is fiction, but that there is more in the background than appears in the recital. There is the shrine of parental concern and longing. There is the pull of home at long range on a man in a far country, sick with loneliness and hectored by temptation. There is the strength to resist born of the lessons and training of childhood. There is the battle with hell in the fires of a sensual civilization, cooked up in fierce tropic heat, where lust runs riot in the hot blood of a dark race. For time has scarcely seen sen-

suality more wanton and unashamed than in Egypt during Joseph's day. Finally, there is in this folk story of home victory, for when Joseph at last looks his old father in the face his eye does not shift. He has been true to his ancestral inheritance. He has not become an Egyptian. He is still Jew and true to the traditions of his boyhood home. May this old story cast its light over us to-day!

THE HOME AND CHARACTER BUILDING

The home is the best place in the world to build character. If it cannot be done there, it cannot be done anywhere. If people of truth and honor, of sobriety and integrity, of conviction and moral courage, cannot be grown under the roof-tree of home, the world may as well quit its search for an honest man.

Of course, you can build character in the school, if you go about it in the right way; in the shop, if you make something finer than money your objective; on the street, if you can keep the devil away. Of course, character is developed in work, in play, in adventure, in devotion, in human contacts, in the struggles of ambition, in the pursuits of aspiration; but in the home you have all this and more.

The home has life at the right time for character building. The forces of being are storming to express themselves and are so sensitive that the slightest impression stamps itself to stay. We used to say that ideals are determined during the first six years of a child's life, but we have moved the hand on the dial-face backward, and we are now saying that these ideals are fixed during the first three years. While the child is scarcely conscious of itself, invisible forces are at work to build character and fashion destiny. During

these first three years of dynamic opportunity, God gives parenthood the right of way, and those who are the authors of the little life have a free and full chance to build against the storms which all too soon must break.

If the home does not build character, it has failed. It may succeed at everything else, but if it fails to hold when the storm breaks, if it has no power to steady when Egypt is reached, if it has no restraints that hold when temptations would allure and seduce, the home has collapsed.

Your home may possess all that wealth and culture and art and travel have to offer. It may be furnished with books and pictures and all that is beautiful. It may be gay with merriment, laughter, and song. It may be a famed seat of hospitality, thronged by friends from near and far, visited by people of distinction and renown; but if your children go to the bad, if they grow up crooked and dissipated, if their characters are stained and shabby and their habits vicious, what a ghastly mockery that noisy, gaudy palace must seem to you!

Don't think that you have a home simply because you have a house. Don't conclude that you have met your obligations to your children when you have given them a bedroom, a dinner table, and a dance hall. Don't think that you can smash the sanctities of life behind your front door and "get by" with it. Don't think that you can play with fire and not get burned. "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap." And often the harvest you reap is in the lives of your children. People are asking to-day what has come over our young people. They would better ask what has come over their fathers and mothers.

If your children form shabby characters, the worst has happened. You want them sound in body, straight and lithe and virile and graceful; but if you had to choose between a crooked body and a crooked conscience, between chalky bones and a rotten heart, between invalidism and dishonor, it would not take you long to make your choice.

You want your children to be well educated. But if the school breaks down what the home builds up, if your children come back from college with their faith in God a wreck, treating with a smile of cynicism the things you hold dearer than life, you count those years at college not a blessing but a curse.

You want your children to enjoy life. Youth and a good time go together. But you are not ready to buy pleasure at the cost of character. You want them to be well thought of, to have a good reputation; but you want more. You want them to deserve it.

You want your children to be clever, gifted, to say and do wonderful things, to paint and sing and write, to achieve, to succeed; but they have spoiled it all if they go to pieces in their character. Character ranks first, and when your children break here the worst has befallen. Hence, if you fail to help your children build character, you have failed at the center. You may have given them everything that money can buy—position, popularity, influence, ease, education, pleasure, travel. But if you have not helped them to a place where they would rather die than be false, where they prefer poverty to duty dishonored, where they would rather go hungry than lie, starve than steal, wear rags than be arrayed at the price of perjury and duplicity, you are only a cheap counterfeit of parenthood.

And you may have been unable to do all that you longed to do for them. It may have been beyond your power to provide the comforts and advantages it was in your heart to give. They asked and you had to say "No," because the purse was empty and your slender stipend exhausted. But if, when they think of their daddy, the chin lifts and the spine stiffens and the heart is filled with honest pride; if, when they think of their mother, temptation is disarmed, sin unmasked, and a soul in the hour of battle goes over the top to victory, you have done the biggest and best thing given to mortal this side of heaven. You may be a drab little man in a shabby office on a side street, you may be a faded little woman with millinery out of date, but your heart is musical with a great song and your name is like a flower whose fragrance does not die.

I read a letter the other day from a son to his father. The boy was charged with something which affected his honor, and of which those who know him believe him to be innocent. He had been given a "raw deal," and the thing that hurt him most was not that he was suffering, but the pain he feared his trouble might give the folks at home. He said, "I have kept from writing hoping I would not have to write. If the worst comes, I am going away somewhere and you will not hear from me for a long time, until I can tell you something that will make you proud of me." Then he said, "If I could only lay my head for awhile on mother's shoulder as I used to do, and cry for a little while, it would do me more good than anything else." Happy the boy with such a mother, and blessed the mother whose holy influence reaches out to her children in the storms of life!

WHAT THE HOME NEEDS

If the home is to fulfill its mission as a builder of character, four things are needed. The first is love—not indulgence, not a love that is spineless. The trouble with so much of the discipline in the home is that it is done not in love but in anger. An old preacher told me that he whipped his son once, and then in anger. When he had finished the boy looked up at him and said, "If I had a gun, I'd kill you." The mother had whipped the boy frequently, and each time it seemed to make him love her more, but the discipline had always been done in love. "Thy gentleness hath made me great." If we are sure that they love us, they may say what they please and do what they like.

What a dull world these crazy biologists would give us who would reduce all life to cell formation and substitute a scientific formula for love! Out on them all! It is not strange that Luther Burbank's attack on man's immortality, the lordliest and noblest instinct of our race, met with such a storm of indignation and resentment. We had come to honor him for his quiet and patient work among the flowers, but when he lifted his hand to crush the fairest flower that blooms in the garden of hope, we said, "You are our friend no longer." And so with every so-called scientist who would reduce all life to physical secretions and degrade the home to the level of a breeding stable. Home is where they love us, and a loveless home is as great a burlesque as a Godless heaven.

There must also be sincerity. Character will not grow in an atmosphere of insincerity, duplicity, and hypocrisy. We want our children to think we are good, upright, sincere, whether we are or not, for we

know that it is impossible for us to help them if they suspect us. As well try to live in an atmosphere empty of oxygen as to expect character to thrive in an atmosphere of insincerity. As well try to grow a garden without sunshine and moisture as to grow character without respect and trust.

The third thing needed is example. We must ourselves be what we would have our children become. We must go where we would take them. They listen to what we are rather than to what we say. Those little eyes can see through every disguise. They pierce the mask of hypocrisy. They read us through and through. If you want your son to be sober, be sober yourself. Something like this was said in a sermon in Atlanta recently. A man who was sitting in a chair in the aisle turned to another sitting beside him and said, "He is giving me hell. I took a drink last night in the presence of my son. But never again." Do you drink in the presence of your children, or in the presence of other people's sons, or in the presence of your employees? Don't blame them when they do as you do. Drinking is always worse at college, they say, when the older alumni return for a visit. I was talking one day to a mother who smokes and drinks and asked her if she wanted her little girl to do as she was doing. "No," she replied, "I most certainly do not." Then, in God's name, quit it yourself. Don't willfully take a path that leads to a vale of tears, to a day when the sun will die from your sky and leave you sitting in the shadows with a dead hope.

The supreme need of the home for character building is religion. They may say what they please about religion, but it is a character builder. It makes better men and women. It creates an atmosphere of sin-

cerity. It helps us to set the right kind of example for these little lives we would not have shipwrecked on the voyage.

It is in the home if at all that the battle for faith in God must be won. Religion is not getting much of a chance in many of our schools to-day. The situation may not be as bad as it is sometimes represented, but it is bad enough. We are told that we should not be surprised that fourteen of the students in our state university have applied for membership in the society of atheists. The number is just fourteen, but that is fourteen too many.

If our homes are to be religious, we who are parents must be religious ourselves. We cannot use the smoke screen here. We cannot camouflage. This subject stops at every door. It rings your bell. There is no way under heaven to hide out. In the name of those you love best, the call is sounded to-day to come to Christ, to confess your Savior, and to live a positive Christian life. Maybe this is what it means for some of us. "A little child shall lead them"—that tiny tot who climbs on your knee, whose, "Now I lay me" has no cloud on its faith, whose chubby hands and pouting lips and starlit eyes make heaven seem near, is pushing the gate wide for you to enter.