

The Roots of Victory

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Scripture: Matthew 4:1-11

Text: Luke 2:52

"And Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

I. I wish to speak upon the value and the necessity of quiet persistent preparation for critical moments in life. You and I are being called upon constantly to face critical situations. The degree of success with which we meet such moments depends not upon the conditions of the moment, but upon the conditions of the past, "The roots of victory rest deep in the history of preparations." I take for a text Matthew 2:52 as suggesting the essence of what I wish to say. "And Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

According to the calendars of Ritualistic churches, this day is known as the 1st Sunday in Lent. Now Lent is a survival of the old Jewish custom of having periods of feasting or fasting when special religious ceremonies were performed. It was essentially a spring time festival which, after about 800 years after Jesus lived, came to be modified into a period of fasting and prayer in imitation of the fasting and prayer of Jesus during his 40 days temptation in the wilderness and described in Matthew in the passage which I read to you. The period of Lent has no special significance for us except as it stands for the recognition, for the hour, for the celebration of an event

¹ According to notes on the text of the sermon, this was also given at the Harvard Divinity School Chapel on February 29, 1904, and "in a modified form to young people at Salem," March 6, 1904. There is good reason to conclude that Earl Davis' sermon, "Preparation and Temptation," which was also written for February 21, 1904 (the first day of Lent in 1904), was an early attempt to approach Jesus' temptation.

which marks the turning point in the life of Jesus, and perhaps a turning in the life of the people whose tradition we share.

But what, in fact, is the real event in Jesus' life that the writer of the Gospel is trying to picture in this passage? It is evident from the fact that the writer tries to make it so unnatural and powerful that he regarded it as an event of some importance. Now, let us see what it really means. We remember that just previous to this so-called 40 days temptation in the wilderness Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan. The story of Luke tells us that about 18 years before this time of Baptism and temptation, Jesus had gone with his father and mother up to Jerusalem to the feast of the Passover. At the time of this visit Jesus for the 1st time in his life had caught a glimpse of the kind of life he wanted to live. This little scene of the boyhood of Jesus, which know so well from Hoffman's beautiful painting, is very real to us, for each one of us can recall some great moment in our early life, when we first caught a glimpse of the life before us, when we 1st began to grow into manhood and womanhood, and first began to think of what we would like to do in life. Such a moment in Jesus' life is this one with the doctors in the Temple Hall he begins to become a man.

But he goes back home with his parents, works away at his trade, keeping his mind alert, studying human virtue, learning to see the spirit of God in all life. Slowly but surely he "was advancing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." But after these 18 years, he comes to the Jordan to be baptized of John in the Jordan. This is an important day for Jesus. Behind him is that long hard struggling period of preparation. Before him is the uncertainty of his life, the uncertain future. It is one of those great critical moments of life when one stops, hesitates, before actually going ahead. As he actually comes to the point of breaking away from the past and going boldly into the future, he stops, hesitates, amazed at the significance of the step in his life, he almost recoils from its possible dangers and errors. Just as one stops, half turns back upon the threshold, as he is about to leave the warm protected home and go into the cold wintery darkness without so Jesus standing upon the threshold of

his quiet protected, secluded life in Nazareth, hesitates before he steps forth into the cold chilly world to meet there his rebuffs and disappointments, his successes and victories. This moment of Jesus' life, a moment of doubt, hesitation, as he turns from his early life to his public ministry, is the real event of Jesus' life that Matthew is trying to describe. It is this event that ritualistic churches honor and celebrate by their period of Lent.

II. But why should Jesus so hesitate and doubt at this period? What was there in his life or his teaching that made him feel uncertain at this critical moment as to whether or not he should take up his public life? The fact is that Jesus knew that the ideas that he was going to teach, the religion that he believed, that he must preach, was not the traditional time-honored religion of the Jews. The Jews were bound hand and foot, body and soul by their strict unyielding obedience to the Law of their father to the traditional ritual, to the time-honored conceptions concern God and his revelations to his chosen people. These old forms had ceased to have that vital moral meaning that they once had. Jesus himself attacked them bitterly, "Woe unto you, Scribes. Pharisees. Hypocrites. for ye cleanse the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess."

But in contrast to these conceptions Jesus had learned to see God in nature, in man, and in his own soul. Jesus had found God the father. To him the real essence of the religious life was love to God and love to man. So long as these forms actually contributed to the moral and religious life, Jesus did not object to them. Only when they lacked moral content, and dwarfed the spiritual life did Jesus ignore their forms. When the Pharisees upbraided him for plucking the grain on the Sabbath which was contrary to the law, he replied, "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath: So that the son of man is Lord even of the Sabbath." The point is that Jesus was a man of plain common sense, and he would accept those forms only as they ministered to his moral and spiritual life.

Now Jesus saw the great moral significance of his ideas: He realized that to give expression to them would bring contention and strife into the Jewish life. He undoubtedly

realized that it would bring upon him reproach, disgrace, and perhaps death. He knew that the ideas which were developing in his mind, and were feeding his moral and spiritual nature, would bring contention and opposition among the people whom he knew. So it was that Jesus hesitated just at the time he was to begin preaching. He was tempted. Should he keep to himself those great ideas that were so noble and soul-satisfying, or should he make the sacrifice, and at the risk of his own life give them to others? That was the great temptation of Jesus. Because Jews realized that the great importance and significance of his teaching, he stood there as it were, after his Baptism, debating with himself as to whether he should do the greater work of his public ministry, or retreat to enjoy his own quiet life as a carpenter in Nazareth? It is just as when a great sailing vessel beating against the wind sails along on one tack for a time. When the time comes to take a new tack, to sail in a different direction, responsive to the turn of the rudder, she begins to change her course, but there is a moment when the sails hang loose, when the ship quivers and hesitates, seeming uncertain just what to do, and then suddenly the wind fills the sails and with a plunge she takes up her new course. So Jesus, at this turning point of his life, stops, hesitates, uncertain. But soon the decision is made, and he follows his new course of public life unerringly, unflinching, through the opposition of his own people, through the desertion of his friends, the hatred of his enemies. Through all these trials he moves slowly and steadily to the very day when for his love for God and man, for his uncompromising devotion to truth, he stood at the great test and laid down his life for others. So Jesus' great temptation was one of those turning points, one of those dramatic critical moments in his life, when great issues were at stake, and when he was called upon to show what kind of stuff he was made of.

III. We are especially interested in this particular event of Jesus' life, not because it was a temptation, not because it was a moment of trial, but because we can look back upon that moment, and with a feeling of pride and satisfaction know that it was a moment of great victory. So great and momentous were the powers at stake, that we have to find an explanation for the victory. Where are the roots

of victory? When did he win the victory? We go to a plant whose growth we have been watching for weeks. So we find there the full blown flower. We stop in amazement. A miracle has been performed. How wonderful! When did it blossom? We stop to think. We trace back of the months of growth. We remember the growing seed breaking up through the earth. We remember the 1st tender leaf. We remember when the small delicate bud appeared, and then how we watched it grow, and expand and enlarge, and now suddenly the flower. When did it blossom? It has been blossoming all the time. Day by day the growth and progress has been toward that blossom. The roots of the flower go back to the earliest movement of seed life under the ground. When did Jesus win the victory? Not at this great critical moment, long before that the victory had been won. This moment of dramatic victory is simply the flowering of his long preparations. The roots of his victory run back into those early years. There with this father and mother in Nazareth. There among his young friends, as a boy, as a youth, as a young man, there at the carpenter's bench, there in the quiet, complex village life of Nazareth, that is when Jesus had won his victory.

In this quiet lonesome hours of daily life Jesus had already overcome his great temptation. Although at the very moment when he is to show the product of his years of preparation, he stops, hesitates, doubts, yet the temptation had been overcome, and the victory had been won in those days when in the small things of daily life, he had learned to do the thing that was right, and noble and true. It is, after all, the unwritten record of Jesus' life that is the noblest and truest. We find him in this great crisis of his life true to a deep-rooted principle, but in our imagination we go back of that event, and find the roots of the victory in the silent conquests made in the hours of slow plodding preparation, when unnoticed by the world, by the very nobility of his own soul, he won victory after victory. Such a training, such a preparation but then the beautiful blossom.

In the early morning hours the sleeping army is aroused by the Bugle call to arms floating out across the still dark air. Suddenly as out of the very darkness of the night an enemy had come upon them. The call is sounded.

Immediately all is life and activity. Men fall into places, lines are formed, the charge is sounded, the battle fought, the victory won. That was the dramatic critical moment, but the victory was won in the long hard drills when the crude mass of men was being made over into a well-organized, thoroughly drilled army. The victory was won in those silent lonely hours when the men sitting before the campfire solemnly avowed to themselves that they would give their life for the country.

Tomorrow we all stop in our rushing busy life to do honor to the man whom we like to think in a time of trial won a great victory for our country. We read in the accounts of his life, and in the stories of American history of the great dramatic events when great victories were won, and the independence of the colonists assured. But you know and I know that it is in the unwritten record of Washington's life that these victories were being slowly won by the years of noble manly preparation. We know that the great courage and power of the American colonists displayed at that moment were but the natural flowing of the plant of independence which had been planted in new soil generations before.

So the victories of these moments, when so much is at stake, when the issue of a life or a nation is to be determined, are won, not at the critical moment, but in the hours of preparation. Jesus' great temptation had already been resisted in those quiet years of hard work by the carpenter's bench, and in his life among the people of Nazareth. For in those days, "Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."

IV. It is not because these ideas are of historic interest, it is not because they throw light upon the character and power of Jesus, but it is because they throw light upon the problems of your life and my life. Each one of us in our own way is working out the problem of his life. Sometimes we feel disheartened and discouraged because we do not get along faster, sometimes we are willing to find fault with our opportunities, but we must remember that it is only at such moments that our lives are raised above the commonplace. If we are to win the victories we must win them in the quiet everyday rounds of duties in our homes,

among our friends, in our business. If we can win victories then, the victories will come also at the great moments. The plant has many leaves but few blossoms.

Then again there is one problem of our life that we ought to be preparing for. We live along year after year without sorrow or misery. But sooner or later the time is coming when we must part with some dear friend. Out of the very stillness of the night comes the great sorrow. It takes us by surprise. We are not prepared for it. Crushed, not knowing in which direction to turn, we suffer and despair. It is to prepare for such possibilities as that that you and I need the growth and development in the deep spiritual things of life. When I hear a man say that he has no need for the religious life, I shudder to think of the hopelessness and despair which any great calamity may bring upon him. The roots of a victory over a great sorrow and hardship are in these quiet hours when we learn to fix our minds upon the great and inspiring ideas and hopes of brotherly love, in the household of the great Father.

But let us direct our thoughts in another direction. I think that this story of Jesus' temptation is of special interest to such people as have inherited or been so fortunate as to see the real worth of modern liberal religion. I had hoped that, as I suggested the great importance of Jesus' victory, that you would see the very close analogy between Jesus' temptation and the temptation of Liberal Christians. We know that we have a conception of God and man and the religious life that is more real, vital and inspiring than the conceptions held by the so-called conservatives. You and I enjoy our simply faith in God and man, but we know that there are thousands of human souls whose lives are poisoned, made unhappy and miserable, simply because no one has told them of a simple religion, of love to God and man, which finds its manifestation in a pure mind and a noble life. The mission in the Temple with the Doctors was seen by Channing and Parker and Emerson, and the hundreds of brave souls who made a sacrifice for their conscious' sake. But the great temptation has not yet come when we shall be called upon to make the sacrifice. The roots of the victory must be in the preparations that you and I are making in our lives now. I say the great temptation has not yet come. But you know and I know that

the Christian Church is being judged and weighed as it never has been before. We are entering upon the period of dramatic temptation. By our lives of purity, and love and service we must make ourselves members of the truth of great religious life. By the individual lives will the value of the church be determined. We are the army of truth and our victory in the moment of battle must be won by the daily drills. Jesus won his victory, "because he had advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man."