

"THE MARKS OF A MAN"

First in a Series of Sermons

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by

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I

"Independent Strength"

Text: Luke 10:29-37

Each year at about the time of school graduation there is a tendency for people to think about the future shape of things and in particular, the role that graduating seniors will play in that future. Advice is widely given in the traditional speeches of this season, and, therefore, I have decided to throw in my advice along with the rest. I want to propose three qualities that it seems to me will be essential for the graduate of 1969 if he is to face up to the challenge of this unique year of our lives. The three marks I have in mind are these:

- (1) The graduate must have within himself an independent, inner-directed strength.
- (2) He must have balance and flexibility.
- (3) He will need a sense of humor.

First of all, consider strength. The 1969 graduating senior will need a kind and degree of inner-directed, independent strength far in excess of that required by previous generations. Why such a premium on this ancient value? An individual needs less internal, self-discovered stature if he happens to live in a society that provides continuous structure and influence upon his daily life. In such a case the social and family leaders have developed a real framework within which he as an individual makes his daily decisions. Today, there are fewer cultural and family guidelines than there have ever been, and especially is this so in the Western societies. I'll give you one example which I think is typical:

The relationship between the university establishment and the undergraduate student. A few years ago the university self view included as a part of its whole task a felt responsibility to provide structure and guidelines for the "living in" undergraduate student. This was particularly the case with women students and was manifested by "hours" regulations at

university residence halls, visiting regulations, etc. The school in effect accepted a disciplinary role toward undergraduates that was quasi-parental. The freshman college woman will face a different atmosphere this fall than did her older sister just four years ago. Universities do not intend today to assume "parental" responsibilities. Increasingly the rule is no rule. The residence halls on many campuses today have little or no hours or visiting regulations. The college girl returning from an evening with her date now has a different sort of challenge before her as they stand at the front door of her dorm. Before she could in truth say: "It's been a great evening, Bob, sorry it couldn't last longer. Goodnight. See you tomorrow." She must be in by 12:00 o'clock lockout; of course Bob cannot come in because of school regulations, and Bob and she are both aware of these guidelines. But now in a growing number of the most distinguished American schools the context is boundaryless. She must say, "Bob, I do not want you to come in; I want to be in by midnight." Everything rests upon her shoulders and she has no back-up support from the school.

There is a vacuum because old guidelines are gone for her. In a patriarchal society she has her parents and her brothers who at great personal cost and effort will protect her honor. They provide a concrete, definite context within which she has support, even shelter. Well, Western society is decidedly non-patriarchal. Parents are very little help to her. The American plan is to turn the son and daughter over to the peer group at age 13 and on their own completely at age 18. In fact, the Western father and mother are frightened of their children and have decided to send money but keep quiet.

Perhaps great civic or nationalistic ideology will help her. In a Communist society, at least on paper, the college girl would have ideological guidelines from the State to guide her at such moments of decision. The thoughts of Lenin or Mao would have cautioned her against self-indulgence. But, the Western student has successfully discarded the myth of nationalistic ideology as a real force in his life.

What about religious faith? We too are in full scale crisis precisely at this point. Hobart Mowrer has challenged us at this very level:

"I cannot claim to be at all fully informed regarding contemporary trends in Protestant theology, but my casual impression here is of a land of shifting sands. Vogues and fashions there are in abundance, but I fail to see anything that looks much like the bedrock of enduring human realities. One writer, by unusual eloquence, force, or novelty, will gain a following, only to be superseded by someone else who outdoes him at his own tricks.....

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"I submit that the prime reason for this distressing state of affairs is the fact that theology, i. e., the science and art in which many of our ministers are trained, is undisciplined verbiage. By what operations is it validated, tested, refined, clarified? What are the canons of evidence which a minister uses for deciding what to preach or write

about? What are the rules according to which he decides what is truth and what is error? Granted that this is at best a difficult area in which to be wise, the minister who merely reads, preaches and perhaps does a little pastoral counseling with carefully selected cases can hardly be expected to have deep insights and to inspire great confidence."

The Christian Church as an institution has not been much help to the graduate of 1969 and in all likelihood won't be by this fall.

The situation then is amorphous as of now. It will not remain in this state of affairs permanently but, nevertheless, as for you who graduate this spring, you will be forced to make almost all vital decisions by yourselves. There is a positive side to it. It means your individual choices will have great weight and significance. They are all yours to make. Expect very little help from the State, from the Church, from your parents because you will receive very little real help.

If this is the shape of things, is there anything to say apart from the description as such. I have a parable for you. It is all yours; I dedicate it to you and challenge you to struggle with it. Jesus Christ told the parable, and it is one of his most famous short stories, the parable of the Good Samaritan.

"But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, 'And who is my neighbor?' Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half-dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three do you think proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?' He said, 'The one who showed mercy on him.' And Jesus said to him, 'Go and do likewise.'"

Notice first of all the man struck down on the side of the road. He has three bad encounters; three kinds of people are against him: the first are the thieves who hurt him; the second and third are the travellers who ignore him. The thieves are completely free from any sense of obligation. They do what they want; they do their thing; the element of tragedy is introduced into the story as the innocent traveller happens by chance to cross their path. The thieves are free in a very total, carefree sense but their freedom is caustic and deadly.

The priest and the legal officer are not guilty of violence but because of their fears and perhaps the highly developed sense of obligation to little matters like their appointment schedules at Jericho, they both decide to

bypass the wounded man, fully intending to report the whole matter to the highway police at Jericho.

Now consider the Samaritan. He is one man against the tide of both apathy and violence. He is inner-directed, independent. He has no precedent to fall back upon, no school regulations to guide him. He makes his own unilateral decision and follows it up with action. The Samaritan has two things at work within him, of which the other travellers have only one:

- (1) He is free but far more than the robbers.
- (2) He feels obligation but in a far deeper and more costly way than the priest and the lawyer.

It may be that within the directionless, boundaryless context of modern Western society there is hidden a benefit in that such a time as ours demands a new breed of men. This road to Jericho upon which we are all travelling is dangerous most of all because some of us are intoxicated with a vicious kind of freedom that sets for itself no boundaries of duty or honor but is the insistence upon individual separate acts and desires unchecked and at random. The second danger is the cold indifference and apathy which has closed our windows toward the neighbor. The new sort of man who will change all of this must stand independent and strong against these two persuasive forces of our present civilization. He must combine within himself the two: freedom and obligation. Freedom, that is the ability to move decisively on his own with little help from others; to do what must be done because he wants to; and obligation, that is the sense of solidarity toward all men around him, toward great truth, toward what is right.

It comes to this -- graduates of 1969 -- we, with you, need more than ever before the inner mixture of these two marks: freedom and obligation. I am not talking about good advice or stronger university rules. We need the story teller himself, Jesus Christ, along side and within us.