



The Easy Way May Not be Best!

"It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem" (1 Kings 12:28).

"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

Today's story is about a king who encouraged his people to "take it easy" in their service toward God. How far should we go for God? It is an old question, yet up-to-date! It is a question we ask and answer over and over again throughout our lives. The words of the king sound innocent; they seem as harmless as a chubby infant fist. You would never dream they could carry such a staggering punch. You could not expect that hidden within is a case of dynamite. You would certainly not believe that behind this seemingly harmless statement, are the fangs of a serpent; in fact, the wrecker of a nation.

Here is the Story: Solomon had died; his kingdom had become divided. Rehoboam ruled over the tribes of Judah and Benjamin in the south, while Jeroboam ruled the ten remaining tribes in the north. Yet, while the people were divided politically, they were not divided religiously; the people were still one in their faith. They still had a common sacred city and a common temple for worship. They sang out of the same hymn books and read the same Bible.

This being the case, Jeroboam was afraid that if they continued to be one religiously, they could end up being one politically. If that happened he would lose his job as the king. To avoid this, he set out to deliberately destroy the religion of the people in his kingdom. Not abolish it; just "distort" and "degrade" it --make it about "something differesnt."

You have to admire him for his insight and shrewdness as he undertook the task. For example, he did not make war on religion in general.

He did not tell his people that to be religious is foolish and futile. After all, religion is something that can never be destroyed. Man is incurably religious. He may have a foolish religion; he may have a hurtful and ruinous religion. His religion may lead him into war against his brother. It may support slavery or form the base for the Ku-Klux-Klan, but *some* religion he will have as long as human nature continues to be what it is; --even if his religion is faith in himself.

Neither did he try to convince these people that their religion was wrong. He knew very well that "Men will wrangle for religion: write for it; fight for it; die for it; anything but --live for it" (Charles Caleb Colton. *Lacon*, Vol I, 25). Had he said to them, "The type of religion in which you have been raised and trained is altogether false and foolish," he would have made little progress. He would have had a fight on his hands at once. People are ready to fight for their religion, whether it is a vital part of their lives or not.

Jeroboam was too shrewd to make an open attack on religion.

What he did say was something like this: While religion is a good thing, and while your religion is perfectly right and proper, it is giving you too much trouble. One wonders if it is really worth it. There is no harm in going up to Jerusalem, but it is certainly expensive in time, labor and money; you know how hard times are right now. I know things must be hard for you.

Instead of journeying up there to worship, you can build a calf in your own village and get on just as well. To go to Jerusalem is altogether harmless, to be religious after the fashion of your parents is perfectly right; but, it is not necessary. What I offer you is an easier way. I am going to offer you a religion that is almost free from expense. You can be religious according to my plan, and have it quite easy.

Jeroboam's suggestion met with a ready response, because there is that in our human nature that shrinks from the difficult. We are all a little bit lazy. It is probably true that, "The average American would drive his car to the bathroom if the door was wide enough." While it is true that millions of Americans aren't working, we can thank heaven that they do have jobs, or our country might collapse.

I know that there is that within us all that goes after the hard thing, the right thing, or there would be no use in my preaching this sermon. However, along with this is a strong inclination to shrink from doing the thing that gives us any serious trouble. We quickly forget that the Bible promises no loaves to the loafer, and that failure always catches up with those who sit down and wait for success.

This easy religion won its way, and in winning, it proved the undoing of a nation. Be careful if your religion costs you nothing, you may be getting what you're paying for. Your religion must make a difference. Charles Spurgeon once said, "I would not give much for your religion unless it can be seen. Lamps do not talk, but they do shine."

Israel decided to go with the easy way. Now, the easy way has not lost its appeal over the long centuries since then. It is still present with us; its invitation to us is this: Do not make truth the test of your religion. Do not make its power to save and to transform the test. Let ease be the test. Choose the church, choose the type of religion that makes the smallest demands.

That is an appeal that is being made to every man and woman, boy and girl in this audience. We must face it and settle it one way or another.

We should decide against the easy way for several reasons:

For one, the person who makes ease the test will fail in the highest realization of him or herself. We simply cannot come to our best without facing and overcoming the difficult. The truth is: no kind of strength is won except in the school of conflict. To take the easy way is to head toward failure. There are very few outstanding people in all the centuries who were born where life was easy.

It is God's intention that we should understand the trials of our neighbor by *feeling* them ourselves; understanding often comes by common experience; experience is never cheap or free.

Sixty-One years ago, Gloria and I started out to minister in God's church. At the time, we didn't know much about people, ourselves, or the ministry. We never guessed that we would learn much more through hardship, than we did in Divinity school. We had both grown up on the farm and thought we knew most everything there was to know about hardship. However, there was more to learn; there is still more to learn.

In 1965, Gloria and I received a call to our first congregation; we were excited. We sold whatever we couldn't take with us, packed the rest in a sixteen foot tandem wheel trailer, left our families and headed for a tiny town in Washington State located near the mouth of the Columbia River.

The back seat of the car was full, so three-year-old Gloria Anne and her baby sister sat on top of all the stuff. We celebrated Connie's first birthday on the road. In the front seat, Gloria sat mostly on my side, since the passenger side was also full. We drove half the way over snow covered roads. While crossing Nebraska in a 2:00 am blizzard, we saw our first jack rabbit in our headlights. We were young and afraid. We were pulling our trailer with a 1964 American with a three speed shift and a ninety horsepower flat-head engine. We were afraid of the police; we were afraid of the roads; we were afraid we would run out of money; we were afraid our car would break; we didn't know what the people at the church would be like. Prior to joining our rural church ministry, neither one of us had been west of Ohio.

There was no interstate 80, so we traveled route 30, which switchbacked its way over the Rockies, the Blue Mountains and the Cascades. After a week on the road, we descended to a point below the snow line on the Blue Mountains and the Columbia River burst into view like heaven itself. This was going to be our home. Our town was a small fishing, logging village on the River. There was a nice old retired fisherman in the church who took an interest in us. I borrowed tools and a lawn mower from him. As pay for borrowing his lawn mower, I mowed his lawn, the church lawn, and an elderly widow's lawn. On Sunday evenings, we always had supper with him in his little cottage overlooking the river.

Even so, after a year of living on \$115.00 a month and preaching to the few people who were coming to church, we started to wonder. There was a log truck driver who sat in the back row and made faces at me all during the sermons; yet, I missed him when he didn't come. A young college girl, named Marilee, started coming to our unpretentious, little church. On Christmas Sunday, she brought her fiance with her; I was delighted. The stove wasn't working well that morning; it was cold. About half way through the sermon the stove exploded black soot all over the room and we evacuated. This was what it was really like in the ministry. I remember Gloria saying, "Honey, do you remember when I said I would go to Tim-buc-too and eat potato peels just to be with you? Well here we are." She's always been a little silly.

What we learned was that every person is enrolled in a life long continuing education program, where effort, hardship, and pain are the essential teaching tools; spiritual growth was not finished for us, nor was it going to be free.

This is also true physically as well as spiritually. The way to the highest physical development is not easy or painless. Likewise, the easy way keeps us from reaching our highest possibilities spiritually.

The person who makes ease the test of religion will never become much of a Christian. For Jesus said,

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matthew 16:24). That doesn't sound easy. Jesus said, "Enter through the straight gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it" (Matthew 7:13).

The Rich Young Ruler turned sadly from Christ because the road was too narrow, too hard, too restrictive. The Christian life is never commended on the grounds that it is an easy way. The way is narrow because it has its restrictions and limitations. There are certain things we must not do, and other things we must not fail to do.

To make ease the test is to fail in achievement. Everyone who accomplishes anything worthwhile pays the price of hard work. The bee that makes the honey doesn't hang around the hive. This is true of those who accumulate a fortune, build a railroad, write a book, or become a Saint. You can expect no return at the end of an easy day. I never feel so good as at the end of a day where I have done something. Why do so many Christians fail? Because they refuse to pay the price of following Christ. They are not going to put that much effort into life. They hold to the saying, "I never apologize."

Surely, we must see that ease leads downward. If there is one inherent problem with our American social welfare system, it is that often, *the more we help people, the more helpless they become*. It was a wonderful thing when President Clinton started the "Work-fare Program."

The axiom is also true spiritually, "Times are especially trying for those who aren't trying." The idea of "work-fare" was a good idea for everyone. It cannot be replaced. We must help people –and they must help themselves, the best they can.

Finally, look at the example of Jesus:

~ Philippians 2:5-8

"Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death --even death on a cross." **What Christ did for us, cost him.**

~ Hebrews 12:2,3

"let us run with **perseverance** the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the God. Consider him who **endured** such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart."

Whatever it costs you to live your Christian life, it is worth it. There is no easy way. Don't be fooled, most of the people who sit around waiting for the harvest haven't planted anything, and they won't harvest anything either.

~ Galatians 6:9

"So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest-time, if we do not give up."