

## "Philosophers and Plumbers"

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Text: Philippians 1:1-11

Paul prays for the saints in Philippi that they may approve those things which are excellent and it is a good prayer for us as for them. A long time ago, William James wrote, "Democracy is on trial and no one knows how it will stand the ordeal. What its critics now affirm is that its preferences are invariably for the inferior; vulgarity enthroned and institutionalized, elbowing everything superior from the highway. This they tell us is our destiny." If this danger were present at the time of William James, it is no less present today. Joseph Wood Krutch, in a collection of essays under the title The Age of the Common Man, reminds us that the common man is not merely a phrase but a fact. He adds that the great question is "How common does the common man need to be?" Does his dominance necessarily mean that the uncommon man will not be tolerated? Will excellence be looked upon as unworthy or undemocratic? In other words will we, in the day of the common man, cease to pray the prayer of Paul that we may approve those things which are excellent?

In all I say today I owe much to a recent book by John Gardner, Excellence. In it he writes, "We must face the fact that there are good many things in our character and in our national life which are inimical to excellence: laziness, complacency, the desire for a fast buck, the American fondness for short cuts, the reluctance to criticize slackness, to name only a few. Keeping a free society free and vital and strong is no job for the half-educated and the slovenly. Free men must be competent men. More than that, they must value excellence. We must learn to honor excellence, indeed to demand it, in every socially accepted human activity." Then Dr. Gardner adds this pregnant sentence, "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing, because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because philosophy is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy; neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water."

Excellence in all things, shoddiness in nothing. Whether he be a plumber or a philosopher, a judge or a janitor, a salesman or a surgeon, a teacher or a tailor, a preacher or a painter, from each we should require, we should expect, not simply competence but excellence. We should set the highest standards for every activity of life, for all creative endeavor: in political life, in education, in industry -- in short universally. This we have not done in our contemporary society. And we must fear that apathy which gives us something less than excellence. Second-rate work by second-rate citizens cannot establish or maintain a first-class power.

We ask ourselves, we must ask ourselves, what are our goals? What are the goals of management in our industrial society? Is management seeking not the quality of its product but the quantity of its profit -- often at the expense of quality? What of labor? Is it indifferent to better work and interested only in bigger wages? If these are the goals we shall have not simply second-rate products but second-rate men and in a highly competitive world we will not hold our own. Dorothy Sayre reminds us that "man, made in God's image, should make things as God makes them; for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing."

How shall we establish for ourselves such standards of excellence? It is extraordinarily difficult, and this for two reasons. In the first place, we are a democratic society and we guard jealously the equality of

opportunity for all men. Also in modern America we do not have that pressure upon us that compelled men in the past: the pressure, first of all, of the struggle for existence. It used to be that all men must work and work hard just to live. Not so in our affluent society. Then we do not have, as some nations do, the pressure of taskmasters which man has had since the beginning of time. In a communist society, for example, there is a compulsion placed upon the worker by the state to produce to the utmost. Not so with us.

Free men must set their own goals. We much cherish, in the words of Whitehead, "the habitual vision of greatness." If we have the wisdom and courage to demand much of ourselves as individuals and as a society, we may look forward to long continued vitality; but if we do not, then we will not long survive - nor deserve to survive. Our challenge is not simply to achieve greater material power or wealth but rather happiness for our people by giving meaning to life and a purpose for living. The precept that you lose yourself to find yourself is, eternally and practically, true. Carlyle said, long ago, "It is a calumny upon men to say that they are aroused to heroic action by ease, hope of pleasure, sugarplums of any kind in this world or the next." We cannot arouse our people by the offer of sugarplums.

Rather we believe, with John Gardner, that "most Americans would welcome a new burst of moral commitment and an end to the apathy, indifference and disengagement which have crept over our nation. The best-kept secret in America today is that our people would rather work hard for something they believe in than enjoy a pampered idleness." Whether or not this is true, we may soon know. We hope that we will be challenged, put to the test, to prove whether or not it is true. We hope we may esteem excellence and demand it of ourselves and others. If we are to raise these standards, if we are to set these goals, we must begin in our homes, our schools, our churches where the minds of men are molded for good or ill.

Certainly this is true of the home where high standards like good manners are caught more than taught. They have to be found in the parents if they are to be found in the child. H. W. Shaw has said, and I urge all parents to note this with attention, "To bring up a child in the way he should go, travel that way yourself once in a while." This is excellent advice. Let me illustrate with minor matters. If you are absorbed with horse-opera on TV, your children are not likely to curl up in their chairs and read great books. If you turn first to sports and comics in the newspaper, your children are not going to become absorbed in world news simply because that is the only section of the paper left to them. If you are in the parade of men in dressing gowns driving their children to Sunday School that they may go home and relax, your children will attend Sunday School only so long as they are compelled to go. After that they will be only as interested as their parents are. (Of course sometimes children develop interests and values in spite of their parents but this is the exception.) It is far better that there should be high standards, great goals, raised by the parents and by example far more than by precept.

Beyond the home there is the school. We in America are committed to a great program of education which must be a medium for raising the standards of our people. Too often, however, we have not sufficiently esteemed education nor adequately supported it. There are states of our Union where the cost of education for the average child is only \$170 a year, which apparently is the measure of the concern or of the ability of these commonwealths. This is a disgrace. We must raise our standard of education and what states cannot or will not supply the Federal Government must. The illiteracy of one area of our country affects all areas.

But more important than Federal aid to education, essential as that may be, is a popular esteem for

education by all of us. We must honor education and the educator as we have not always done. Test yourself. If a psychologist were giving a word association test what would be your reaction to "schoolmarm" or "professor"? The reaction of most would not suggest that respect for education, that reverence for learning, which is essential in a society that is seeking for excellence. I hope we are ridding ourselves of that anti-intellectualism which has been too prevalent. Why should it handicap a man for public office if he happens to be what is known among us as an "egghead." If a Harvard graduate is an educated man, and one must presume that he may be, then present indications seem to be that we are gaining some respect for the trained intellect in public office. This is as it should be.

Our educational system, itself, must emphasize excellence if it is to be worthy of our respect. I think we have passed through that period of the '30s and '40s, of the academic lock-step, when all children were advanced a grade regardless of IQ or performance. We would, I hope, no longer agree with the educator who insisted that "any school system in which one child may fail while another succeeds is unjust, undemocratic, and uneducational." Of course this is the sheerest nonsense. This takes us into the mad world of Alice in Wonderland, that profound book which has something pertinent to say about so many things. You remember in Alice, the Dodo was supervising a race. It was a peculiar race because everyone began when he liked and finished when he liked. After a while the Dodo said the race was ended and they all gathered around to inquire who had won? Whereupon the Dodo struck a pose, "like a bust of Shakespeare," and pondered the question. Then he pontificated, "Everybody has won and all must have prizes." Now this is a mad world and when education is based on such standards it, too, is mad. All excellence involves discipline and testing and achievement. All excellence demands something of the individual. In our educational system, the least endowed should have the opportunity to develop the best that is in him, and the superior should be recognized and encouraged to excel. Both must be done.

Those of us who have taught know something about "the infinite capacity of the undergraduate to resist the intrusion of knowledge." This can, however, be overcome. In the educational process some knowledge must get through. But beyond the mere acquisition of knowledge the educational system worthy of a free people must offer the highest goals and inculcate the highest values. It must also lay upon the individual a sense of his obligation to use his gifts for the good of all men.

Finally, what of the church? We in the church have sinned against values, against standards, against excellence no less than secular institutions. I say it with sorrow for the church is by nature committed to excellence and yet as Dorothy Sayre has said "in her own buildings, in her own ecclesiastical art and music, in her hymns and prayers, in her sermons and little books of devotions, the church will tolerate or permit a pious intention to excuse work so ugly, so pretentious, so tawdry, so twaddling, so insincere, so insipid -- so bad-- as to shock and horrify any decent craftsman." This, alas, is true. We are building more churches than ever before and most of them are without architectural distinction. Our ecclesiastical art is below the standard of calendar art. In many churches we have banal music poorly executed. Sermons of literary merit or intellectual excellence are the exception, not the rule.

These may be minor matters. There are greater concerns. There are ethical standards and moral disciplines which the church should demand of men. When we see the shabby state of our private and public morality, the shocking disclosures of laxness in both business and government, we cannot relieve the church of its responsibility particularly when many of the men involved have been "good churchmen." When we note the increasing materialism of our people and the emphasis upon monetary values both within the church and within our society something is very, very wrong. Where are our standards of excellence? We have only one standard, or should have, even Jesus Christ but has He been

lifted up among us that all men may be drawn to Him? Against his perfection we must see our shoddiness; against His excellence, our littleness. We need re- dedication in His spirit and in His name.

John Mason Brown reminds us, "Existence is a strange bargain. Life owes us little: we owe it everything. The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose that is greater than we are." And John Mason Brown is only paraphrasing the words of our Lord when He said, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake, shall find it." For us, excellence in life must come from losing ourselves in sacrificial service for others in love that we may find ourselves in Christ, our Lord.

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