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## Lenten Meditation: The Future of the Church: Galatians 6:17

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THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

Gal. 6,17: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."

In the Congressional library at Washington there is today a mural painting of two human figures worshipping before a crude stone altar on which a fire is burning. One form clothed in dirty rags, is deeply bowed in shame in the attitude of the penitent and contrite heart. The other form, clad in purest white, is but slightly bowed, with a rapt worshipping countenance, in the attitude of adoration and surrender. To anyone who would consider the picture's symbolic representation of the life of the Church, it is incomplete. We must add another figure -- the figure of a young man or woman standing erect, sword in hand and lamp burning, crying with Isaiah: "Here am I, send me!" Without that figure, there is, humanly speaking, no future for the Church. With that figure standing close and warm before the altars of God the Church may well have a sense of huge dawns that sleep before her, of new victories and a great hope. Concerning this I should like to say a few words to you today.

It is probable that never in the history of humanity has more been written and said about the younger generation than in our own day. It is equally probable that never have the opinions been more contradictory and confusing. Walter Lippmann speaking about the new freedom of the younger generation writes: "They are the prisoners who have been released. They ought to be very happy. They ought to be serene. Yet the result is not so good as they thought it would be. The prison door is wide open. They stagger out into a teachless space under a blinding sun" -- brave and brilliant atheists who have suddenly become very nervous -- young women who have emancipated themselves from the tyranny of the home and are now enduring the liberty of their brave new world -- young men who are worldweary at twenty-two. Is this our younger generation? Are these the man and women of tomorrow? We should not be honest with ourselves and with the Church of Jesus

Christ if we did not admit that it represents a goodly number of them. Even among those who are members of the Church there is an amazing amount of uncertainty, of futility, of restless milling around and asking if the game is worth the candle. Only recently a minister preaching at one of our American colleges invited questions --- and seventy-five per cent of them wanted to know if life was really worth living, if it had any meaning at all!

That is a dark picture. But the real tragedy lies deeper than that. It is an undeniable fact that the older generation sees little of all this. Only now and then - when young men and women suddenly break loose in wild parties -- when they get helplessly drunk -- when they break every commandment from one to ten -- then parents, pastors, and teachers hold up their hands in holy horror and say: "What is the world coming to?" They have seen an effect and made no effort to dig for the cause. They have seen a sudden blinding and bitter result --- and they do not know that behind all this mad chasing after thrills --- this pitiful restlessness --- this contemptuous smashing of all standards and walls --- lies the simple but infinitely tragic fact that we have given youth nothing to live for. What have they to look forward to? Business? That may be something, but only a few more can find the whole end and aim of life in the mere making of money. Politics? There is no lasting glory in deciding to be either a Democrat or a Republican. What else is there? Youth --- always ready to fight for a great cause --- to hitch its wagon to a star --- to follow a dream --- can find nothing more exciting in the modern world than Hollywood and love stories, divorce courts and murder trials. And the fault is ours --- and not theirs. Have you noticed how surely the European dictators have placed their fingers on this fact? Right or wrong, they gave youth something to live and die for --- and even now their ideas have become passions and their faith has burst into flame.

And just here is the Church's greatest problem and most glorious opportunity. Let the Church stand before this strange generation --- not as a whining beggar asking for the crumbs of their time and talents --- not as a hard, cold school-

master trying to sandbag life with a series of frantic don'ts — but as the blessed company of the redeemed of God in whose life and work there is even today a magnificent and unparalleled opportunity for the splendid energies of youth. Let youth break loose if it will — but let the Church provide the God-given opportunities for this love of high adventure, this inspired willingness to break the boundaries of the past and to pour the power of youth into the channels of the Spirit of God. Here is the answer — and before God it is the only way out of the bitter mistakes we have made with the younger generation.

And the words of our text demonstrate how it worked out in our life two thousand years ago. St. Paul is sitting in a prison cell in Rome. Twenty-five years had passed since the Lord Christ had met him on the road to Damascus and taken his days and his years away from him and placed them into the service of eternity. There had come twenty-five weary and heartbreaking years in which the relentless hand of the living Christ had driven him, a lonely wanderer, over the face of the Roman Empire. There had come twenty-five joyful and conquering years in which he had become the greatest instrument in the hands of the living God the world has ever known. And now evening had come. He was nearing the end of the road. He had only a few more letters to write to those whom he had brought to Christ. In some striking illustration he wanted to tell them just what his years of work, his life in the Kingdom had meant to him. And as he was looking about for such an illustration, he suddenly noticed that everything around him was marked with the stamp of the Imperial Caesar. The clothes of the jailer were marked. The chain which bound him to the wall of his cell was stamped with the mark of Caesar. The utensils from which he ate and drank bore the mark of Caesar. The initials of the Emperor were engraved in the palm of the guard who waited on him. Here was what he had been seeking. St. Paul turned to the wall and wrote on his tablet the immortal words: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." He rolled up his sleeve and there was a great mark which he had received at Philippi. He uncovered his shoulder where the flesh was still torn and broken and bruised from the time he had been stoned at Lystra. His whole body bore the

marks of the Lord Jesus.

How did these marks get there? Certainly not from days and years of taking the easiest way -- of reducing life to shallow valleys and low hills -- of forgetting tomorrow and living for today. Paul knew that he held the future in his hands -- and he knew also that that future could be glorious only when some one would have the blessed God-given courage to carry the marks of the Lord Jesus into the grave. And when three hundred years had passed a banner that had never been seen before floated over the palace of the Emperor -- and in the center of it was a cross!

The marks of the Lord Jesus -- here is something for restless, disillusioned youth looking for high adventure and new courage. The marks today may not be physical -- although if certain forces in the modern world succeed in their plans they may again be on our bodies. But there are the deeper marks -- the marks of the world's cold indifference and blazing hate -- the marks of a life consecrated and dedicated to His service. Here is something worth living and dying for. Here is the last freedom of the redeemed human soul -- to live life as God would have it lived -- not small and narrow and fearful, but rich and full and brave and true. Long ago that courage came into the world with Him Whose marks are upon all His children. To a few lowly fishermen He said: "He that loseth his life for my sake shall find it." They looked at Him in amazement when He said that; but they soon saw that He meant it. He proved it in His own life and death. He entered into their loneliness, stooped under their burdens, knelt with the very gentleness of God to wash their feet, and at last in the power and grandeur of the yearning heart of God stretched out His arms to redeem them from sin on a cross and died with a prayer on His lips. And this is the Christ whose service men want to reduce to the dull, deadly routine of modern church life and confine in the small narrow ruts of habit and custom. The future of the Church does not lie that way. It lies in bearing the marks of the Lord Jesus as the world's supreme badge of honor and glory.

The marks of the Lord Jesus! Whenever and wherever they appear, the future comes alive in the eyes of men. And for our prodigal generation it is the only way out and the only way home. Can we not see that? Many years ago our Lord was spending one day to publicans and sinners — weary, beaten people like those that walk the streets of Saint Louis today. He told them a story — the story of a father who waited so long every evening as twilight fell — waited for a son who was in a far country. The neighbors shook their heads as they passed in the dusk. And then one night — after many years, the little town was all agog. Somebody had seen the lone, silent watcher throw open the gate, utter a cry, and run into the arms of a ragged tramp all dusty from the road. And now the house was full of light and sound and hurrying figures. Something like that, He said, is going on in heaven all the time — and these people who were listening to Him would find themselves at home again, for all the sorrows they had known and the fear and the loneliness. The marks of sin — broken bodies and stricken hearts — would be taken away — and His own marks — the white garments of His righteousness would clothe them forever.

If this generation, so lost in its own way, will go that way, the future of the Church, even in the eyes of men, is radiant with promise. After all, you cannot lose with Him standing by your side. Today, as never before, we need at long last the conquering Christ. We need the vision of Him as the risen and exalted Lord of the Church, moving in the glory of heaven, receiving the glad hosannahs of the spirits that surround the throne. We need the vision of Him with a name above every other name, on His head the crowns of universal Kinghood, and in His hands the sceptre of the Universe. Three hundred years before Bethlehem the great Alexander, having crossed the six rivers of Mesopotamia came at last to the seventh. His men were tired and worn. Realizing that he could not go on, Alexander turned back, sailed down the Indus, and died in a drunken brawl in Babylon. Twenty-three centuries later, thirty years ago, another man came to that same final crossing. He too had come to conquer — with a little

band of missionaries. He, too, said: "I can't go on." But one morning before dawn he went out to the banks of the river alone. Several hours later he came back -- and there was something of eternity in his face. "I have settled it with Him", he said, "I am ready to go over now." And so my last word to you today is "Settle it with Him -- and go over." The marks of the Lord Jesus will be your promise and seal of final victory.