



RUBBISH

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"And Judah said, The strength of the burden-bearers is failing, and there is much rubbish; we are not able to work on the wall." Nehemiah 4:10

One of the chief problems of any civilization is the disposal of rubbish. I have been told that in a typical city there is eight to twenty-five hundred pounds of refuse per year per person. The United States with all its know-how is a backward country itself in some fields and one of these fields is the disposal of refuse. A few years ago our country sought and obtained technical assistance from a United Nations agency about this particular problem. A British engineer connected with the British Ministry of Health, at the request of the American Surgeon-General, made a special study of the problem. This engineer was amazed at some of the things he found. After two months of study he presented a seventeen page report which any resident of the capital district could have written for him without any study. He talks about fly infested dumps, the inefficiency of municipal incinerators, the dilapidated and unsanitary containers and many other problems. I do not know the figure for the past year, but eight years ago New York City alone was expending fifty-five million dollars in its sanitation department. Rubbish is big business!

Do you realize that one of the great dangers that would face us in event of attack could be the breakdown of our rubbish disposal? I have lived in two cities when a strike occurred in this department. I have seen what could happen. Day by day the piles of rubbish grew on the streets. Some years ago, in Amsterdam, such a situation defeated a candidate for mayor. As the condition got worse the citizens became more and more grumpy. The city officials were, or tried to appear, amused. One day a woman called the mayor and said, "What am I going to do about my

rubbish?" By that time the mayor was no longer amused and he snapped back, "Put it in the middle of the street!" She did. Then they arrested her and the fun began. The mayor told me after the next election - when he was no longer mayor - "I was defeated by rubbish."

Rubbish once hindered the rebuilding of a city. Read the book of Nehemiah and discover the fascinating story of the restoration of Jerusalem during the Persian period. In the fourth chapter of this book is the verse: "And Judah said, The strength of the burden-bearers is failing, and there is much rubbish, we are not able to work on the wall."

It was that verse that started me thinking about this whole problem of rubbish. Perhaps moving this past September increased my interest. We certainly do accumulate things. Not only do we accumulate them, we resist getting rid of them. Someone has taken the position that people started to save things when it was not so easy to make purchases that were needed. So you saved every bit of string, every nail, every scrap of metal, every piece of wire. Some day you might need this in an emergency. There was a feeling a few years ago that the change in American living habits might alter this, but it has not. My Aunt Fanny had an attic. Everything she ever owned was put in that attic. It was a wonderful thing for me to go to her house on a rainy day and be privileged to go up there and explore. Now we do not have attics any more, but we do have storerooms and garages and sheds. We manage to fill all the space we have with the accumulation of the years. What is more tragic than someone else's attic? What is more depressing than to go into someone else's house to dispose of things? What is more revealing than to hear a person say, "Now why did I save that?"

Today I want you to think of your mental attics. Look at all of the things that have accumulated there.

Your past failures and disappointments. You have kept them and periodically you take them out and look them over. Your past successes and triumphs. These you dust off now and then with loving care. There is a whole corner devoted to grudges - all the recollections of the unkindness and thoughtlessness you have experienced at the hands of other people. Once we went on our vacation and the Parsonage Committee did some redecorating in our parsonage. They papered and they had floors refinished. We had to come home one night. A side door had been left for the painters and they had the key, but when we went to bed we bolted the door from the inside. In the middle of the night we heard a terrific pounding. I went down and there stood the painter. "I got worried," he said. "I remembered that I had left a rag soaked with the fluid I had been using to clean the floors. It might have burst into flames." So he got up and drove several miles to make sure. But we let these old grudges and resentments lie around carelessly - they are inflammable! This is what Jesus meant when he said that if you are on the way to make a sacrifice in the temple and suddenly remember that you have a quarrel with someone, put down your gift, go and make things right with your brother.

There are other things in our attics. Those things that might have happened. What would have happened if we had made a different choice. Long ago Gordon Gilkey called these "vanished alternatives." We brood about what could, we think about the road we did not take. You may be shocked when I say that grief can become rubbish in our lives, cluttering up our days and making it impossible for God to do the things he wants to do for us. Grief can be an ennobling experience leading us to new levels of living, or it can become a deadening influence in our lives. To all of this add the outworn ideas which make us content with our lives as they are. You will refuse to wear last year's hat or to drive last year's car, but you are content with last year's ideas. Everywhere

in laboratories scientists are trying to bring our knowledge up-to-date. In addition philosophers and theologians and sociologists are working to find the truth. But the rubbish of old ideas makes their work difficult.

You and I must become aware of God's purifying power that can burn up this rubbish in our lives. Too often we have tried to rid ourselves of all these things and have failed. We need to discover that we cannot accomplish this alone, but that which we cannot do, God can do when we give Him the opportunity. In Pilgrim's Progress you will remember that Christian was freed from his burden at the Cross. Outside the walls of Jerusalem there was a place where the garbage and rubbish of the city was burned. This rubbish heap was kept burning all the time. In New Testament times the place was called Gehenna and became a synonym for hell. Perhaps there is something very suggestive here that people should think of hell as the place where the rubbish is burned. This is one of the real problems with which each of us must deal, how to get rid of the rubbish. In 'The Mind Goes Forth' the Overstreets say: 'But there is nothing, perhaps, that we more drastically need to learn than how to call an episode finished when it is finished. This is the art of rescuing the present and the future from the tyranny of the past.'

Listen then to these words from the Gospel according to Luke: "To another he said, follow me, But he said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father. But he said to him, Leave the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you go and proclaim the kingdom of God. Another said, I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home; Jesus said, to him, No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."

I am always interested to hear explanations of these terrific demands. So often we try to soften

them. But they are not meant to be soft. Our trouble is that we fail to recognize Christianity for the radical thing that it is. Jesus told us that his teaching was not like sewing a patch on an old garment. You had to get a new coat! But we keep on sewing patches. That is why we fail to find any real vitality in our faith. In the forty-third chapter of Isaiah the prophet says: "Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing." Get rid of the rubbish.

Let us face this, that just to get rid of rubbish is not enough. Jesus again says: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest; and finding none he says, I will return to my house from which I came. And when he comes he finds it swept and put in order. Then he goes and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first."

Many a man has decided that his life was full of rubbish. He has removed the rubbish and then discovered only an empty life. You need to catch the full force of this parable of the empty house. Imagine someone coming into his house one day and saying, "What a mess; I am going to get rid of all this." So he gets rid of it, but he buys no new furniture. Is there anything more empty than an empty house? Then apply this to a person who has found that his house is dominated by an evil spirit. He casts out the spirit, the furniture and everything else; he sweeps and cleans the house; but he does not put anything else in its place. Then, says Jesus, the evil spirit returns and brings seven other spirits more evil than himself.

Here the church is trying to help you. During Lent, for example, our church is asking you not only to give up something, but to add something to your life. On Wednesday evenings we are inviting you to come to the church. Why? Because we have nothing

else to do? Hardly that, we are asking you to come in order that you may refurnish your house. We are going to sing together because we believe that singing together helps people feel a sense of community and fellowship and because we believe there is help and strength in our hymns. We are going to worship together through Bible reading, prayer, and meditation. Then, for those who wish, we are providing a rich store of interest groups from which you may select new furnishings for your mind.

Don't tell me - I know what you are going to say. I have so many things to do. I have responsibilities. It is cold. It is slippery. I am tired. I could give the rest of the list, but I can sum up all your excuses in a very brief statement - which is our text today - "And Judah said, The strength of the burden-bearers is failing, and there is much rubbish."

This week I received a packet of material from the Methodist Publishing House. Now the Methodist Publishing House is the outgrowth of John Wesley's conviction that a good Christian is a well-read Christian. We need to remember Wesley's great adventure. In a time when very few people went to school, in a time when most people had to work long hours at very hard labor, in such a time Wesley got his followers to read. No material was available, so he published material. I was thrilled when I found this little pamphlet in my mail with the title, "A great new adventure for your church. . . ." Eagerly I opened it to discover what this adventure was which our Publishing House was suggesting, for I was convinced that our church needed a great new adventure. I found that, according to the Publishing House, this great new adventure consisted in providing our choirs with impressive new apparel. What a let down! Please understand that I am very happy to have our choirs look beautiful. But I have the feeling that our church - that every church - in such a day as this must find something more significant than a new robe. For too long the Christian

church has played around with the little external things of religion.

Have you had any significant experience in your prayer life? Are you still saying the same prayers you said five, ten, fifteen years ago? Are you aware of the possibilities of prayer for your life? Just what is the meaning of church membership? What do we believe? What are we trying to do and how are we trying to do it? Have you met any great Christian of the past? What significant religious book have you read in the last five years? How can we make the Bible come alive? Have you participated in a group that tries to interpret the Scriptures dramatically? Just what is the relationship between our Christianity and the current issues in our own city? How should a Christian regard his city government, his schools, housing and all the work-a-day problems with which we deal? What is the meaning of the discoveries made in the caves of the wilderness - those wonderful documents called the Dead Sea Scrolls? What influence will these discoveries have on our beliefs? Choose what seems most interesting and spend five evenings during Lent putting new furniture in your mind. At the same time on Tuesday mornings a group of women will be studying five books of the Old Testament to see what they have to say to us today.

Christianity is more than having your name on a church roll, or coming to a supper, or even more than supporting the church financially. Christianity is commitment, and search, and adventure. It results in changed lives.

A couple of years ago I had to go up to a little town for a dedication service. They told me we were going to dedicate a memorial door in a church. The sanctuary was upstairs and as I went in I saw this beautiful door which had been built just to the right of the pulpit. The chairman of the committee said, "Isn't it beautiful?" I agreed. The wood was attractive, the workmanship was superb. We walked down to

the door and as we were waiting for the service to begin I started to open it. I just cannot resist seeing what is on the other side of a door. One of the committee rushed over and said, "Don't open that door." I asked why not. "Well, he said, "In the first place you can't. It is fixed so it won't open. In the second place if you did you would fall fifteen feet because it doesn't lead any place." Then I was told they did not have money enough to build a stairway on the other side of the door, so they decided to build the door anyway and hope that someday in the future they could provide the stairway. Hear, then, the parable of the door. How often our religion is such a door, that cannot be opened and that leads no place. But religion does not need to be that and we want to help you find out what it can be for you and we want to show you where it leads.