

THE INFLUENCE OF A CHRISTIAN MOTHER

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 11, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

Many, many years ago Amma May Jarvis, in the city of Philadelphia, set apart the second Sunday in May as a day on which to honor her mother. Some publicity was given to her idea and before long the second Sunday in May began to be used by a number of people as a day in which to honor their mothers. The movement has grown until today across the length and breadth of America and in some foreign lands "Mother's Day" is honored by millions of people. In a world that is often negative, destructive and evil, any good wholesome influence is encouraging. It is especially encouraging to see a whole nation of people pause to honor mothers.

I am not much in sympathy with setting apart just one day out of the whole year to honor our mothers. I like better the sentiment expressed in a telegram sent by a young man who had moved from his hometown of Sweetwater, Texas, to the city of St. Louis. The telegram read simply, "Every day is 'Mother's Day' to me." This particular telegram impressed me when I was a small child with how much it meant to his mother. This was my first contact with the idea of "Mother's Day" and it has lingered with me through the years. Every day ought to be a day in which we honor our mothers. This is not to say, however, that it is in any way wrong to set apart a special day to give special honor to our mothers. Just as we celebrate a birthday or an anniversary and thereby give it double meaning, so we can well afford to honor our mothers on this second Sunday in May.

Every Bible student knows that parental respect is a part of God's plan from the beginning on until the end of time. As a key member of the ten commandments there is commandment number five: "Honor thy father and thy mother, that thy days may be long in the land which Jehovah thy God giveth thee." (Ex. 20:12). Almost at the other end of the Bible, the apostle Paul echoes the same command, "Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right. Honor thy father and thy mother (which is the first commandment with promise), that it may be well with thee and thou mayest live long on the earth." (Eph. 6:1-3). While this speaks of both parents, it is not out of place to single out mother for special attention and respect on occasion. In this study it will be my purpose to focus our attention upon three meaningful examples of the influence of a godly mother in the lives of those about her.

Example Number One

On Paul's second missionary journey he came to Lystra in the province of Cilicia. There he saw the young man Timothy, an outstanding young man, who was open-hearted to receive the gospel. His talents and his openness to the Lord impressed Paul greatly. Of him we learn, in Acts 16:1-2, that he was "the son of a Jewess that believed; but his father was a Greek. The same was well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium... Him would Paul have to go forth with him."

It is likely that Paul had met him first on his previous mission journey which included a visit to Lystra. In I Tim. 1:2 Paul refers to "Timothy, my true child in the faith." In II Tim. 1:2 he again speaks of "Timothy, my beloved child." It seems, then, that Paul had preached the gospel first in Lystra on an earlier occasion and Timothy had been one of those who was disposed to become a Christian. Now, after a few years, Paul returned and found Timothy growing and maturing as a Christian. Later, when Paul wrote his final letter of the New Testament, II Timothy, he was imprisoned awaiting trial before the Emperor in Rome. In that letter

the fourth chapter has in it a passage of unusual sadness, where Paul speaks of several who had departed from the faith and had left him as well. Then he said to Timothy, "Give diligence to come shortly unto me." (II Tim. 4:9). There seems to have been a strong bond between these two men, a bond like that between father and son, all of which leads us to feel that Timothy must have been an outstanding young Christian.

We ask, "But how did Timothy, living in a Roman city in a pagan province, happen to become a Christian?" It grew out of his childhood training. Paul wrote to him from the Roman prison, "I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers in a pure conscience, how unceasing is my remembrance of thee in my supplications, night and day, longing to see thee, remembering thy tears, that I may be filled with joy; having been reminded of the unfeigned faith that is in thee; which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice." (II Tim. 1:3-5). Later, in the same epistle Paul wrote, "From a babe thou hast known the sacred writings which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus." (II Tim. 3:15).

Here is the story. Timothy had been reared in an unfavorable environment by a devoted Jewish grandmother and a devoted Jewish mother. They had taught him the sacred scriptures from early childhood. This was the foundation of his faith. These were not public women. They were mothers at home. They did their speaking through Timothy. No mother need ever go out of her own household in order to achieve greatness. The home affords a devoted Christian mother her greatest opportunity to make a contribution to the spiritual development of her children and, in doing so, to the nation and the world.

Example Number Two

We change the scene and go back into the Old Testament to the story of Moses. In Ex. 2:2-3, we read of Jochebed Moses' mother, "And the woman conceived and bear a son, and when she saw him, that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. And when she could not longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes, and daubed it with slime and with pitch; and she put the child therein, and laid it in the flags by the river's brink." I think all of us are familiar with the story. Because the Jews were becoming so numerous the Egyptians had decided that every Jewish baby boy should be destroyed. It was just at that moment that Moses was born.

Moses' mother hid him for three months. Then, when it was no longer possible to hide this growing baby, she put him in a little basket of bulrushes and set the little boat in the edge of the Nile River. Her plan included the leaving of an older daughter, Mariam, nearby to endeavor to speak a word when the baby should be found. We believe that it was God's providence that guided Pharaoh's daughter to this particular spot and opened her heart to a desire to save the child's life. Not only was the life of the baby saved, but Moses' own mother was sought to be his nursemaid during his early years. This was Jochebed's opportunity and she used it well. There must have been countless hours when she told her own baby the story of God's creation and all the rest of the early history which we read in the Bible. In these many quiet hours with her baby she instilled a deep religious faith in God and in his will in the mind of this child soon to be so important in the history of mankind.

All of this is obvious when we read that moving passage from the Hebrew letter in the New Testament which describes Moses' ultimate choice. "By faith, Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing rather to share ill treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; accounting the reproach of Christ greater riches

than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked unto the recompense of reward." (Heb. 11:24-27). What his mother had taught him in those early years was never forgotten. With all of the glitter and the glamour of Egypt available for the taking, Moses chose to stand with the Hebrew slaves rather than to yield his life to the way of the Egyptians.

Example Number Three

Our third scene occurs in the little-regarded province of Moab. Because of a famine Elimelech and his wife Naomi had left the land of Canaan and had sought a livelihood in Moab. With them they had taken their sons Mahlon and Chilion. In Moab the two sons found young Moabitish women who pleased them and they were married. Within a relatively brief time all three of the men in the story died, leaving only three widows--a mother-in-law and two daughters-in-law. With their husbands dead the logical thing was for the women to separate. Naomi would go back to her own native land and to her own people. Ruth and Orpah would do likewise. However, there is one element in the story that is most unexpected. Naomi's influence had so fallen across the life of Ruth that she was not willing for the two to part. It was on a dusty road in this little province of ancient Moab that Ruth spoke those familiar words that have inspired millions by her devotion to her mother-in-law, "Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee; for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God, where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. Jehovah do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." (Ruth 1:16-17).

Had it not been for this great love which Naomi and Ruth shared, had it not been for the powerful influence of Naomi on the life of Ruth, there would have been no Gentile blood in the genealogy through which Christ came into the world. In the course of time Ruth married Boaz, father of Obed, father of Jesse, father of David. Because of this remarkable mother and the influence which she had Ruth became the great-grandmother of David the king, and an ancestress of Jesus our Lord.

In these impressive examples from the Bible, it is my conviction that had there been no devotion to the Lord on the part of Eunice, there would never have been the great Christian evangelist Timothy. Had there been no dedication to God on the part of Jochebed, there would have been no Moses. Had there been no Naomi, with her faith in God and her ability to share that faith with Ruth, there would have been no beautiful story of a Moabitish girl who took her place in the genealogy of Jesus. Living in a strategic time and in a significant place, each of these women made the difference. Each was a bridge over which a life moved into a position of greatness. Such is still the role of Christian mothers in our time.

Our Attitudes Tell

Our attitudes toward our mothers tell a great deal about us. One of the stories that I have read in years gone by that has lingered in my mind is one concerning a former governor of California. Then governor Johnson was invited to make a significant speech somewhere in the east. It was of such a nature that a number of the members of the Congress were present and even several members of the Supreme Court. The speech was highly acclaimed and the press of the nation carried the story. Upon his return to California a reporter asked him, "The proudest day of your life, Governor?" His answer, "No, it wasn't." "What day then?" Again the answer, "The day, when as a boy of twelve I got my first pay envelope at the end of the week with three dollars in it and gave it to my mother, I remember telling her, 'Here, mother, you needn't take in washing any more.'"

Our greatest example, however, comes from our Lord as he hung dying on the cross. In the agony of dying for the sins of all the world, with the weight of the world's woe upon his heart and the agony of suffering in every muscle of his body, he still had time to be concerned about his mother. To the apostle John, the beloved disciple, he said, "Behold, thy mother." Then, to his mother he said, "Woman, behold thy son." (John 19:26-27). This passage closes with the words, "And from that hour the disciple took her unto his own home."

We love our mothers because of the love that they have shown to us. They brought us into this world by risking their own lives and by suffering special pain. They reared us through a period of years interspersed with vexations, trials and tribulations. They made countless small sacrifices for us: the loss of a half-hour of sleep, the going without in order that we might have, our small illnesses that made them ill, and all the other procession of problems and anxieties. Surely we owe everything we are or ever hope to be to our mothers.

Even more important than our rearing is the fact that most of us first learned of God at mother's knee. She it was who taught us first of Jesus Christ. She introduced us to the spiritual values and the eternal hopes that are presented in the scriptures. It is no wonder, therefore, that we have a special place in our hearts for mothers who have done so much for us, both on the physical temporal level and on the divine eternal level of life.

One of the greatest blessings of my own life was a childhood guided and supervised by a devout Christian mother. Each afternoon it was her requirement that I should take an afternoon nap, but rather than an hour of rebellion it was a favorite hour because she made it pleasant by telling in her matchless way some story from the Bible. In later years when I was old enough to read the Bible for myself and to realize what it meant to be taught the message of the scriptures, I was amazed to discover that there was no major story in the scriptures that I did not already know. So thorough had been the teaching of my mother that there was no major account in the scriptures that was not already known through those early childhood story times. In at least this one point, I share with Timothy the blessing of a godly mother who "from a babe" taught "the sacred writings."

A mother's love is one of the greatest influences in a man's life. It lifts him to higher ground and guides him to greater achievements. It is her confidence and her understanding that give strength. All of us are perhaps familiar with the moving lines,

"If I were hanged on the highest hill,
I know whose love would follow me still.
Mother o' mine, Oh, Mother o' mine.

If I were drowned in the deepest sea,
I know whose tears would flow after me.
Mother o' mine, Oh, Mother o' mine.

If I were damned o' body and soul,
I know whose paryers would make me whole.
Mother o' mine, Oh, Mother o' mine.

The best way for us to show our love and appreciation for our mothers is to live up to the dreams which they have had for us, Christian dreams that we should grow into the likeness of our Lord himself. There is no finer way that we can honor the memory of our mothers than by following Christ and growing into the kind of men and women that he would want us to be.