

It Takes Brains to be Moral

Many years ago Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick preached a sermon that attracted a great deal of attention from college students. He called it "The Need of Brains in Religion." Its salient points were mainly two: first that mere goodness without brains was not enough. Goodness, he declared, should be accompanied by intelligence. Otherwise a surgeon may have perfectly good intentions of operating on you to save your life, but if that good intention was not matched with medical knowledge and skill he could scarcely do much good. And the second point was that ~~was~~ the world is as much in need of dedicated brains as it is of dedicated hearts. If great brains were dedicated to God's purposes our world would be greatly different.

That sermon has always impressed me deeply. But it suggests another facet of truth which I would like to hold up for your consideration this morning. I should say that if goodness needs to be accompanied by good intelligence it actually takes high intelligence to be good. In other words, it takes brains to be moral. Goodness is not something ~~achieved~~ apart from intelligence. A person simply cannot lead a good moral life without employing his brains.

To support this contention I summon one of the most famous passages of scripture. Asked what the greatest commandment was Jesus ^(Matthew) replied by saying: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets." In this brilliant statement Jesus wove together in one piece all of the threads that make up the good life. Since no one of these threads may be cut without damaging the whole piece, I would like to focus our attention this morning on the part that suggests we must love the Lord our God with all of our minds. Remove that and you destroy the pattern. It is impossible, I believe, to love either God or neighbor without exerting the mind. It takes some brain power to love God and your fellow men. Hence it takes brains to lead a good life. It takes brains to be moral.

If what I say is true one would get the idea that our present society is marked by

a pathetically low I.Q. We all make proud protestations ~~about~~ against the revelations of public crime and immorality. But a bit of analysis shows that there is so much moral decay in all of us that it hardly behooves any of us to talk about the rest of us. During the vacation from which I have just return I gained a rather startling insight into this fact. We were being entertained in the home of a powerful business tycoon who made a million dollars in that era when the law of the jungle reigned supreme in business ethics. This man, now quite old, was very frank to expose the mentality which characterized his business activities. But during all of the days we spent together he complained bitterly against our government which he said was the worst on the earth, terribly corrupt and rotten. He referred to a certain fellow business man, also powerful in the things of this world, who was so Crooked that he wouldn't trust him with counterfeit money. He underlined the fact that this man was a Jew. In the course of our conversation we got around to discussing the recent cheating scandal at West Point. Oh, everyone does that, he said. He bet that I did when I was in school. He confided quite frankly that ~~when~~ he got his two sons into Annapolis by buying the exam questions for them. Then I referred to the speech that Herbert Hoover had just made deploring the dishonesty in our public and private lives. "Oh, I'll bet that Hoover cheated ~~himself~~ when he was in school." Later on he confessed his boundless admiration for Hoover. Thought he was one of our great presidents. Still later in our conversation he referred to Sen. McCarthy. Siad he knew McCarthy well. Regarded him as a bright chap who had done a great deal of good in Washington. But in the next breath he offered the opinion that McCarthy was as crooked as they come. Now all of this added up to a quite startling revelation of a certain kind of mentality. On the one hand it condemns public immorality and crime, but on the other hand assumes that everyone is incapable of being honest. This attitude reflects, I believe, a completely shoddy and pathetic exhibition of intelligence. For though this man, who is typical of so many of us, had the brains to make a million dollars, ~~but~~ ^{he} showed himself to be utterly moronic when it came to understanding moral issues. It takes brains to be moral.

Today we are happy to welcome the students of Ohio Northern University. I suppose I am speaking most directly to them for those who seek a college education place themselves among those who bear the responsibility for superior intelligence. Thus if it takes brains to be moral college students, because of their advanced intellectual training, assume the responsibility for attaining a moral capacity that sets the standard for our society. It may be that many of the students who are presently enrolled in Ohio Northern have no intention of using their brains to be moral. Possibly some do not possess the brain power to live up to the standards of morality which are very high. Evidently this was the case at West Point. Most of the 90 dismissed cadets seemed to confess by their cheating that they did not have the brains to live up to the high code of ethics. It was too high for them so they had to resort to cribbing. Actually, it seems, they did not have the brains to be moral.

Under the guidance of the commandment that we should "love the Lord our God with all our minds" let us explore the areas of life in which it takes brains to be moral.

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First, let us probe a bit deeper into the loss of morals. It should be said, I believe, that many people lose their morality when they lose their heads. The loss of brains has a tragic result on behavior.

This is the temptation that besets many young people when they go away to college. They may consider that they have been unduly sheltered at home and that their own individual desires have been smothered by parental authority. So secretly they are determined that college days will be a casting off of restraint. The trouble is that many students thus lose their heads, and hence their morality. It is ~~is not~~ not considered very intelligent to "throw the baby out with the bath." But this is precisely what many do. Eagerly assuming the controls of their own lives, they not only dismiss parental authority but all of the background of moral and spiritual training which had surrounded them from their birth. But this action they indicate that they have lost their heads.

Going away to college is like cutting the apron strings for many. But this really means that now the student is in need of much greater brain power than he ever had before, because whereas he had formerly relied upon the thinking of his parents now he relies

on his own. It seems that when many apron strings are thus cut the brains that are desperately needed are sadly lacking.

Now it should be admitted that many simple, unbrilliant people are highly moral. It does not necessarily take the brain of a genius to be moral. But what is significant is the fact that many people of more modest intellectual power use all such power that they have, while some superior brains get tragically lost. The greater the brain power the greater and more tragic the loss.

Recently I heard a state patrolman say that teen agers have the best native capacities for learning to drive automobiles. They learn more readily and rapidly and they are better able to handle a car rightly if they have learned rightly. At the same time he pointed to the fact that the greatest rate of accidents occurs in the 16-25 age grouping, thus making it necessary to increase insurance rates where teen-ages drive. This seems to indicate that available brains are not used. In a very real sense it is immoral not to use the brains you have to drive with. There is the driver of the "hot rod" type whose one cylinder mind is in control of an eight cylinder car; whose five horse-power brain presses the throttle of an 115 H.P. engine. Whenever you see someone acting like a fool in an automobile you can be pretty sure that his brain power is of low calibre. He hasn't got the brains to be moral, for killing and maiming people is strictly immoral. To lose one's head is to act immorally.

On the other hand when people paralyze their brains with an intoxicant so that they murder people on the highways or in the home, they have not only deliberately lost their heads, but they have acted, thereby, immorally. Shakespeare put it this way: "O God, that men should put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains." (OTHELLO, Act 2 Scene 3)

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For another thing it takes brains to preserve and promote one's individuality. We live in a world that is constantly seeking to destroy individuality. Only those persons who exert the full force of their intelligence in ~~their~~ resisting this trend are capable of maintaining their own personality.

It really takes brains for an individual to understand that the crowd-like minds

want him to act as they do so they will feel better about themselves. It takes brains to see through this ruse. Most victims of the crowd-influence never possess the brain power or insight into the situation in which they are enslaved.

To begin with it takes real intelligence for any person to discern and appreciate himself as a person. He must be able to see himself as an individual with individual potentialities. The person who surrenders himself to the herd never sees himself as God intended that he should. His I.Q. ^{is} ~~was~~ too low.

Our whole world of social customs and clever advertisements is dedicated to getting the individual to conform to a pre-arranged behavior pattern. Be it the smoking of a certain brand of cigarettes or brushing the teeth with a particular toothpaste, or be it slavish copying of social habits, all seek to destroy individuality. No individual can survive without the brains to see through these traps and chains. And it will take brains to break away and be the person God intended you to be.

In college there will be persons of low intelligence who will seek to drag you down to their level of behavior and thinking, and if they succeed you will have confessed, by virtue of their success with you, that you didn't have the brains to be yourself.

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In the third place I think we can safely assert that in this twentieth century it is impossible to heed the commandment that we should love our neighbors as ourselves apart from intelligence. To love our fellow men and treat them with respect requires that we love God with all of our minds.

The early men on this planet were distinguished only by their wits. They had not chance of competing with the animal life ^{when it came to} ~~with~~ physical prowess. They overcame all dangers and hardships by force of intelligence. Now nature has been subdued. But man's existence is far more seriously threatened than it was in prehistoric times. He is threatened by his moral infancy and ineptitude which prevents him from getting along with other fellow beings. His ~~problem~~ ^{problem} is moral and theological. Now man must apply his wits to his moral problems or perish. It will take all the brains he possesses. The moral problem consists of the relationship of man with man.

The poet Shelley once declared that "A man to be greatly good must imagine

intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and in many others; the pains and pleasures of his species he must share." Imagination is an extension and exertion of the intellect. It takes brains to imagine greatly. It takes brains, therefore, to understand one's fellow men and put himself in their place.

Thus the prejudiced person is a person acting and thinking immorally because his intelligence has failed. It takes no brains to be prejudiced against others because of race, color, or creed. In fact, prejudice exists only in the absence of brain power. Prejudices cannot ~~stand against~~ withstand the searching of the intellect. Prejudices result from ignorance and they nearly always fade in the powerful light of reason. Hence some of the most stupid people on earth are those ^{who} wish to treat Negroes as slaves and second class citizens and Jews as crooks.

Albert Schweitzer, the great medical ~~xxxxx~~ missionary in Africa, who has one of the keenest minds in our present world, has written: "The circle described by ethics is always widening. Primitive man has duties only toward his nearest relations. All other living beings are to him only things; he mistreats them and kills them, without compunction. Then the circle widens to the tribe, to the people, and grows ever wider until at last man realizes his ethical association with the whole of humanity. **This represents an enormous act of thinking.**" (ANTHOLOGY, p.239)

If the commandment of Christ that we love our neighbors as ourselves is ever fulfilled on this earth it will require an enormous act of thinking, and this can only come through people who dedicate their minds to God.

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But finally I think that we should say quite honestly that brains alone cannot compell us to lead the good, moral life. We should realize, however, that it takes brains to see that we cannot live as we ought to live if we live alone. It takes brains, I believe, for a person to understand that he needs the help of God.

By the earnest application of our mental powers we can certainly improve ~~the~~ our moral behavior. But when we have done all that we possible can we still cannot insure the moral action that we know to be required of us. Therefore the person whose intelligence is really effective discerns his need for God. For what we cannot do through sheer brain power God can do by His grace.

What I am saying now is that it takes brains to be religious. There are those who have ~~misunderstood~~ equated religion with the lack of intelligence. Erich Fromm, a famous psychoanalyst, in a recent book has pointed out that the great Fraud believed that religion contributed to the impoverishment of intellect. Freud thought that belief in religion was a shaky foundation for morality and ethics because he evidently thought that religion was on the wane! Well, religion has not waned. It may be that some types of religion have contributed to the impoverishment of the intellect. That I confess, but that kind of religion I do not recommend. Rather I recommend the kind of religion that requires brains for understanding. I do in fact believe that it takes brains to see the need of religion. This happens when a man assesses his personal situation and discerns that he cannot of himself enforce the kind of behavior patterns that he desires and that he knows to be right. Hence he understands his need for help - from God.

President Patton of Princeton used to say that "You can't make a boy moral merely by spraying him two hours a week with a course in ethics." Rather what he needs is to be immersed in the realization that he was made in the image of God and that he was created for a purpose. Moreover he needs to know that he lives in the kind of a world where he may attune his motives and purposes to those of Almighty God and that God will sustain and strengthen him in his living.

I could testify personally that the more I think and know about God the more appalled I am by my own wrong actions and thoughts; and the more necessary it seems to me that I should do right. My own moral humiliation and improvement seem to come in direct proportion to my fellowship with God. As I draw near to God He sensitizes my conscience and mind to the realization of my own sin and shame. I might despair that I could ever be better were it not for the assurance that God will help me to be the person I ought to be.

I think I shall go one step further and say that I think it takes brains for a person to realize that he needs a personal savior. It takes brains for him to see that he cannot save himself alone. So he seeks a Savior. Through the ages the great and good souls have embraced Jesus Christ as their personal Savior and it was this relationship that enabled them to say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Thus a Christian is one who is saved because he has the brains to live a good life and the brains to see that he needs God to guide him.

God be in my head, and in my understanding;

God be in mine eyes, and in my looking;

God be in my mouth, and in my speaking;

God be in my heart, and in my thinking;

God be at mine end, and at my departing.