

Sermon for Sunday, May 7, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"MORAL RESPONSIBILITY--KEY TO THE FUTURE"
Acts 13:13-41

Text: "When they were still living as aliens in Egypt he made them into a nation and brought them out..." Acts 13:17

Beginning today Christians in America celebrate Christian Family Week. Actually, it is eight days since it ends next Sunday with Mother's Day. As I was doing my preparation for today, two events occurred that made my topic seem even more important, for I had determined to speak today on the Christian home. The first event was the death of J. Edgar Hoover. Mr. Hoover was, in my opinion, one of the greatest Americans that ever lived. Not only did he create the greatest law enforcement agency in the world, but he has stood for such moral integrity that his men have become known as the "uncorruptables." Somehow, in this one man, the moral integrity that made our country great was brought into focus.

The other event that occurred was the breaking of a drug ring made up of youth in St. Louis County who made drugs readily available to other youth. The fact that even grade school children have been taking drugs points to a radical breakdown in family life in our community.

The critical problem that faces us today is not scientific nor technological. Rather, it is a moral problem. As a matter of fact, our technology has outstripped our moral capacity to handle it. Modern man has developed fantastic powers including the powers for destruction, and the question that faces him is shall he use them for good or evil? Back during the days between the two World Wars when the first was still remembered and the second was already a menacing shadow on the horizon, a Britisher, Sir Philip Gills, wrote, "If I smell poison gas in Edgware Road, I am not going to put on a gas mask, or go to a gas proof room. I am going out to take a good sniff of it; for I shall know that the game is up." Had Sir Gibbs been able to foresee the potential for death and destruction of which we are capable today, one wonders what he might have said. Yes, the question that faces us is basically a moral question.

You and I live in a world that sets certain physical limits on us by its very structure. We live in a world that operates on laws, order, harmony. The scientist is guided and governed by laws of nature. This is good and necessary. He has a stable foundation on which to work. How could we fly an airplane if we could not count with absolute certainty on the physical laws that make flight possible? How could we produce energy for driving the engines of our cars if the laws of combustion and so on were not absolutely reliable? This is the kind of world we live in. A world that we can count on--a world that is structured.

Now it is true that this structure of the physical world places certain limitations on us. As long as we stay within the framework of this structure, we can be productive and happy, we can discover new and wonderful ways to live within that structure. But the moment we rebel against that structure of the world we live in, disaster is the inevitable consequence. Take, for example, the law of gravity. We are not thrown off this spinning ball of mud on which we live because of this law. And we use this inbuilt structure of our world for many good things. Yet the moment I rebel against this law, the moment I violate this fundamental principle of my physical world, I do not destroy the law, I destroy myself. Suppose I decide to jump off a ten story building because I don't like the law of gravity, because I don't like this restriction on my life, because I don't like to have this kind of

structure to my world. Yet in spite of my resentment and rebellion, I do not break the law of gravity when I jump. I break my self instead. I do not destroy the structure of rebelling, I destroy myself.

Now, in the same sense of the word, the world in which I live not only has a physical structure, it also has a moral structure. And of the two, perhaps the latter is by far the more important. At its deepest level, life is not physical but spiritual and I think this is something of what Jesus meant when he said that man shall not live by bread alone. So, as I must learn to live in a physical world that has structures and limitations that it places on me, so I must learn to live in a moral or spiritual world that also puts structure and limitation on me. When I rebel against the structure of my physical world, I destroy myself. By the same token, when I rebel against and violate the moral structure of my world I also destroy myself. I find that I live in a morally structured world that places before me a "thou shalt not..." and a "thou shalt..." In the Bible the story of Adam and Eve makes this quite clear. In the center of their world stood the moral restriction that God placed on their life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As long as they did not touch the fruit of that tree, as long as they obeyed the moral structure, the moral restrictions, that God had placed on their life they could live happily and well. But the moment they rebelled against and violated the structure of their moral world, they had to suffer the inevitable and dreadful consequence. Yes, the problem that faces the world today is at heart, a moral problem because we live in a world that has a moral structure to it. When we violate that structure we destroy ourselves, we suffer the inevitable consequences of our rebellion.

How are we to respond to this moral problem that faces our world today? First, we must respond in the homes of our nation. Mr. J. Edgar Hoover who has served since 1924 as the director of the FBI, is perhaps more deeply aware of the moral plight of our nation than any other man. He has said, and I quote, "One of our great challenges today is to make American youth into productive citizens of tomorrow. Young people are full of energy, initiative and talent. They are looking for something to do. They need guidance. The key lies here." Yes, the youth of today needs guidance and if they do not get it in the homes from their parents, I don't know where in the world they will get it. How can we raise a generation of morally knowledgeable young people who are morally responsible to take over the leadership of a nation that was founded on moral insights if we are not teaching them in the home? Mr. Hoover, whom I quoted a moment ago also had this to say, "This nation was founded on religious freedom. Religions have guided us in the past. They must continue to be our guide in the future. An America faithful to God will be an America free and strong." And then he added this, "The country as a whole must draw from its great heritage of religious freedom...to meet the challenge of the future. The family is so important to the proper rearing of young people." And then he concluded, "but unfortunately the family is more a name than a fact."

Yes, we live in a world that has a certain moral structure to it, and if we violate that moral structure, we destroy ourselves. What about the future--what about the future when the home is not communicating strong moral codes, strong ethical standards to the young people? What sort of future is there for a morally bankrupt generation that has not been taught right from wrong.

True morality cannot be separated from a relationship to God and yet the homes of our nation are increasingly drifting away from any religious orientation. It is not enough to cry out against the immorality of our day. It is not enough to decry and deplore and deprecate. If we are to be morally responsible we must begin in our own homes and in our own lives to be a God-fearing, Christ-centered people. We must be a people who put duty and responsibility first ahead of our own selfish desires

and pleasures. There can be no moral fibres, no moral backbone to a nation whose families are not willing to pay the price of moral responsibility. We must regain a certain toughness about ourselves and our families that rejects easy self-indulgency for stern duty in the knowledge that there are no easy answers, no free answers, to the moral dilemma of our time. If moral responsibility is the key to the future then in the cradle, the seed-bed of America--our homes--we must begin to pay the price of moral toughness. Let us call ourselves back to the church as families, let us call ourselves back to a renewal of our relationship to that one institution in our society that stands for moral responsibility. Let us require of ourselves and our children the price of allegiance to God. Let us demand of and for our children religious training in the moral structure of our world. Let us demand of and for our families regular worship, full commitment, that we might renew each week our own dedication and loyalty to God and to the moral structure that he has placed on life.

Indeed, there are many of us this morning who profess to be alarmed and concerned about the world today and we wonder what things are coming to. Yet at the same time we are not requiring of ourselves and our children growth in the knowledge of God by regular church school attendance. And while we deplore the situation in the world, we ourselves are not faithfully worshipping God and warming and renewing our souls at the fires of his word. In the last interview before his death Mr. Hoover was asked, "How has the Bible influenced your life, your career and your work?" He replied, "The Bible has been my lifelong companion and the book most influential in my life. I have read the Bible all my life. Over the years the teachings of the Bible have been the guide to my daily life." When asked, "Do you have a quiet time each day to meditate and seek guidance or inspiration?", he said, "Yes, I find a few minutes each day at home, at the office, while traveling to meditate and pray. These minutes enable me to gain a perspective about the problems and decisions which each hour come across my desk....A man who closes himself off from divine inspiration is a small, narrow man whose decisions will be petty and vindictive." Let us begin at the one place where we do have some control and where we do have some authority to make changes, in our own homes and with our own families, and with our own children.

But second the moral breakdown that threatens our world today must be met and faced by all of us as a nation. As a nation we seem to be losing our sense of direction. Who and what we are as Americans becomes increasingly fuzzy and less clear. In his last interview when he was asked, "Have the principles of your religion guided you in the organization and operation of the FBI? If so, how." Hoover replied, "Yes, I have administered the FBI on the principles of honesty, integrity and fair play. We in the FBI work hard to protect both individual rights and the safety of the community. Religion, if it is to be meaningful must be an integral party of everyday life." We seem to be characterized lately by a loss of will, a disintegration of our national backbone because what we stand for is costly or demanding. What do we stand for? We stand for a view of life, a view of the moral structure of the world, that says the individual is of surpassing worth. This nation was founded on the principle that no man, no matter how lowly or mean, was outside the love of God. That he is made in God's image and he must be free to respond to God. Therefore, no one has the right to claim the whole man, no totalitarian force has the right to him. Therefore, we wrote into our Declaration of Independence these words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights...." Yes, because a man is made in God's image he is of surpassing worth and he has certain inalienable rights which no totalitarian force may claim.

Because we believe this we crossed an ocean to spill our blood and spend our

resources in World War I. Again, in World War II we went back to do the job over again because we believed in this ideal. And because we did believe, when the battle was over we picked up our enemy. We wiped the blood from his face, we bound his wounds, we rebuilt his cities, his factories, his commerce. We did it because even though he had been our enemy and even though we had defeated him, we had no claim to his total allegiance for that belonged to God. And our nation has never coveted any nation's land or resources or peoples. We have only desired for others what we have demanded for ourselves.

Why is our nation engaged all around the world in the defense of freedom? Because if we are to be morally responsible we must say to every totalitarian force that would claim the whole man, "Thus far and no farther." Thus are those today who denomstrate and say, "get out of Vietnam now." Are we shedding our blood, spending our money, wasting our natural resources for an impossible dream? Only history can make that judgment. But let history say that this nation under God was morally responsible, that it was faithful to the last to what it stood for, to the insight which it had been given. Let history say that we as a people attached more than patriotism or nationalism to our flag for we alone of all nations endued it with a moral responsibility for the worth of every individual.

I do not know what the future holds nor would I presume to guess. But I am sure that if we have a future that is worthwhile it will be cause we have been morally responsible--a responsibility that begins in the home, a responsibility that is brought into focus as a nation stands for what it believes without compromise or apology. Sir Gibbs said, "If I smell poison gas in Edgware Road, I am not going to put on a gas-mask, or go to a gas proof room. I am going out to take a good sniff of it; for I shall know that the game is up." By the same token, when we as families and as a nation lose our sense of moral responsibility the game will surely be up.