

Sermon for Sunday, November 23, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor  
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"WHEN BRUSHING WON'T HELP THE CHILDREN'S TEETH"

St. Matthew 27:15-26

Text: "And all the people answered, 'His blood be on us and on our children!'"

--St. Matthew 27:25

"The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

--Jeremiah 31:29b

Some cavities are beginning to appear in the spiritual teeth of many of our young people today. Lewis F. Powell, an Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, said in an address to the American Bar Association, "Today, the overriding concern--not merely of youth, but of other large segments of our people--often seems to be a highly individualized self-interest. In the familiar phrase, everyone wants to do 'his own thing'. Self-assertion seems to be the modern aspiration: to be independent of--if not indeed to reject--the familiar disciplines and values of home, school, church, and community." Mr. Powell goes on to say that the work ethic, which is the cornerstone of a viable society, is also scorned by many. Some of these simply think society owes them a living while others equate dedication to work with a materialism which they reject. Some of these spiritual cavities we see in some today is the view that the individual owes little loyalty or obligation to authority and to traditional values. Rather, allegiance is to one's own conscience and his own desires.

Calling this attitude "unanchored individualism", Mr. Powell sees it reflected in hostile attitudes toward existing institutions as well as excessively tolerant views toward personal conduct--such as sexual morality, use of drugs, disobedience to laws, and even the loss of a sense of honor. As a matter of fact, one of the flourishing new businesses today is selling college theses and term papers to thousands of students who are practicing cheating. Some of you may have seen a recent report where one university withheld grades from over 600 students suspected of submitting papers as their own work, but which in reality had been bought from commercial firms. The honor system has basically disappeared from our modern colleges.

A recent book entitled The Changing Values on Campus reports that only one student in four regards casual premarital sex relations as morally wrong. Only 50% believe there is any justification for going to war even when it is to counteract aggression from without. 41% of the students believe that interchange of partners among the married is acceptable and 74% see nothing wrong with relations between homosexuals.

The consequence of the changing moral values of our day are indeed alarming. St. Paul once said that in the last days men will be arrogant, disobedient to parents, unholy, profligates, haters of good, reckless, lovers of pleasure. (II Tim. 3:1-4) There are many of us who are wondering if all of this is not moving us closer towards the final collapse of human society. For example, one writer has listed five reasons for the collapse of a civilization. Here they are: 1. The rapid increase of divorce; the undermining of the dignity and sanctity of the home, which is the basis of human society. 2. Higher and higher taxes and the spending of public money for free bread and entertainment for the populace. 3. The mad craze for pleasure; sports becoming every year more and more exciting and more brutal. 4. The building of gigantic armaments when the real enemy is within, the decadence of the people. 5. The decay of religion--faith fading into mere form--losing touch with life and becoming impotent to guide the people. Do you think those five indications of decay and collapse of a society fit us? Are they not a fair description of our world today?

And do you know where they came from? They were written in 1788 by Edward Gibbon. When he wrote his great work The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, those were the causes to which he attributed the collapse. Surely our society cannot be far behind.

However, it is easy enough to catalog some of the serious problems we see today. But the real question is this: what is the cause of the decay in the spiritual teeth of our youth and other large segments of our society today? Indeed, how did all of these cavities come about? And then a further question--is there some sort of holy toothbrush, or some new spiritual toothpaste we can use so there will be fewer cavities, so that our children can show us their spiritual tooth chart and say, "Look, mom and dad, no cavities!"?

Unfortunately, the causes of many of our problems may not be helped by brushing at all. You see, the Bible tells us that the sins of the fathers are visited on the children. The Bible tells us that when the fathers eat sour grapes, the children's teeth are set on edge. Do you remember our scripture for this morning? The religious leaders of the Jews have brought Jesus to trial and have forced Pilate to sentence Him. Pilate tries to avoid the problem and wants to release Jesus. Nevertheless, the people insist on His death and Pilate bows to the seemingly inevitable. However, he tells them that the blood of Jesus will be on those who are clamouring for His death. To this the Jews reply in the words of our text for this morning, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Well, it may not seem very fair that those men involved their children in their sin that day. Yet, like it or not, it is a fact of life. The sins of the fathers are indeed visited upon the children, even unto the third and fourth generation.

Some of you may have read the book, Games People Play. This is a popularized version of a counseling process that tries to help us understand how people relate to one another. One of the things the developers of this approach discovered is that bad games played in families, bad ways of relating to one another in the home environment, are learned by the children. When they become adults, they play the same bad games, they relate in the same inappropriate and inadequate ways. And it was discovered that the same games had been passed down for several generations. Yes, the sins of the fathers are visited on the children and when the children's teeth are set on edge by sour grapes the fathers have eaten, brushing isn't going to help the children's teeth.

So, if the children of today have cavities in their spiritual teeth, let's lay the large share of the blame where it belongs--at our own doorsteps. As a report to our General Assembly several years ago put it, "juvenile delinquency is an evidence of adult failures." Fosdik, in a little book entitled A Faith for Tough Times, puts it this way, "The family counts. It is humanity's primary cell. If a nation's homes disintegrate, nothing can be right." And then he adds this thoughtful sentence, "But the fact remains that the world never gets a Christ, or anyone Christlike, except through a Holy Family." As we are approaching the Christmas season when our attention will be focused on Jesus and the Holy Family, I hope it will serve to remind us all that the world never gets anyone Christ-like except through Holy Families.

Unfortunately, even our church homes--the organized church--often appears to be on the wrong side. For example, a committee on Family Life of the United Methodist Church issued a resolution implicitly condoning sex for single persons, homosexuals, and

those living in unspecified "other styles of interpersonal relationship." Six Christian education executives of the United Church of Christ recently drew up a statement maintaining that sex is moral as long as the persons involved are committed to "fulfilling of each other's personhood"...whatever that means. A United Presbyterian official magazine ran an issue on homosexuality implicitly condoning it as long as it was between "two consenting adults." And when the church is eating that kind of grapes, brushing isn't going to help the children's teeth.

Let me suggest several areas where we need to do something about our children's spiritual teeth. One such area is discipline. In Proverbs 29:17 we read, "Discipline your son, and he will give you rest; he will give delight to your heart." Recent studies of delinquency reveals that one of the major causes is lack of discipline in the homes of children getting into trouble. The Bible puts a very strong emphasis on discipline. Immature young people need the restraining hand of parents to guide their footsteps. They need the emotional security of having set limits beyond which they may not go. Perhaps you remember the story of Samuel in the Old Testament. As a mere boy he went to the temple to serve under the High Priest, Eli. Now, Eli had two very wicked sons and God told Samuel this about Eli, "I will judge his house forever for the iniquity which he knoweth; because his sons made themselves vile, and he restrained them not." As a matter of fact, much of the disrespect that youth have today for adult authority, for the laws and standards of society, is because they have no respect for authority at home. No young person is wise enough or mature enough to be left to his own. As the Bible puts it, "A child left to himself bringeth his mother to shame." (Prov. 29:15)

When God chose Abraham to be the founder of the Hebrew nation, he had this to say about Abraham, "I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment." (Gen.18:19) And if the church and the home are to produce the sort of young people our world so desperately needs, we must command our children and our household.

But there is another element to discipline. It was in the passage from Genesis that I just read, but you probably missed it. The Bible says, "he will command his children and his household after him..." That is, Abraham himself observed the limits of his own discipline! Just yesterday a lady commented to me, "My father used to say, 'do as I say, not as I do.'" And then she added rather sadly, "There is no way that was going to work." Children are not going to have a disciplined life no matter how much urging they get if their parents have no discipline in their own lives. You and I must discipline ourselves. Who we are, what we do, the actions we take often speak so loudly our children don't hear what we say. And let me add this thought--the fact that your children are gone from home doesn't mean you don't still influence them. They may be grown and have children of own. But your life, your actions, the things you do, still influence them.

A second area in which we need to do something about our children's spiritual teeth is in the area of faith. Is what you say you believe lived out in your life? Does your faith find expression in your home, in the family relationships? When trouble or problems come, do you respond to them in the way you say you believe? Children are a reflection of parents. When they are small, they copy our actions--do the things we do. As they grow older, they not only imitate us, but they absorb from us our ideas about life and about God. In the Old Testament the Bible talks about King Abijam and this is what it says, "He walked in all the sins of his father, which



he had done before him..." Yes, he imitated his father. And then the Bible says of him, "and his heart was not perfect with the Lord his God." If our faith is inadequate or imperfect, if our faith is not lived out in our lives, all the brushing in the world is not going to help our children's teeth.

After God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt He told them to love Him with their minds, their souls, and their strength. And then God said this, "these words you must learn by heart, this charge of mine; you must impress them on your children..." That is, they were to communicate their faith to their children. And then God said this, "you must talk about them when you are sitting at home and when you are on the road, when you lie down and when you rise up." And that meant quite simply that they were to live out their faith day by day, twenty-four hours a day.

I know all of us this morning want the best for our children, for our children's children, and for the children of this community. The best we can give them is a discipline that we live by ourselves and a faith that finds expression in our own lives. And no matter how old our children grow--and even though they may have children of their own--they still look to us to see if their example still holds.

I once served a church in which there was a fine young man. His mother was one of the sweetest Christians I have ever known and his father was an Elder in the Church. The young man seemed to have so much going for him. Yet, as he came to me and we counseled several times, I felt he was turning his back on God. I couldn't understand it for at one time I had felt he would decide for the ministry. Later it came out that his father had been having an affair. Then I knew that long before it was public knowledge the young man had known. The moral discipline he had been taught and the spiritual faith he had been told about were no longer real to him for his father himself had not lived by what he taught. I often wonder about that young man--where he is, how he is faring--so much potential seemed to have been destroyed because a father had failed and his son's teeth had been set on edge. All the brushing in the world wouldn't help his spiritual teeth. It could happen to me--it could happen to you. And if it does, the blood will be on not only us, but our children as well.