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(Howard Baetjer's Tree Talk, on "Courage")

When as a camper, I listened to Tree Talks and Sermons; I knew fairly soon what my first Tree Talk would be about. I still believe that my subject is the most important quality a person can possess, so I want to return this year to that first topic. But first, let me ask you to follow the line of reasoning which leads me to say that this one quality is most important.

Listening to these talks as a camper, I often thought, "That makes sense," or, "We all agree with that;" it seemed to me that the subjects of tolerance, thoughtfulness, honesty, loyalty, etc. were ideas that all of us understood and agreed with in our hearts. As I thought this I asked myself, "Why, then, do people do the wrong thing so often?" Now, as then, I am convinced that when we do the wrong thing, most often it is because we lack courage. We all have basically the same values in our hearts — the deciding factor in the quality of a person's life is whether or not he has the courage to live by what his heart tells him. For this reason I think that there is no quality more important than courage.

The importance of courage can be seen if we think how we would behave without it. Suppose, for example, that one of us feels sorry for a classmate who is constantly laughed at and teased by others, and we want to help him and be friendly. We know that if we help this poor character, some of the cuts might be aimed at us by the gang having its fun being mean. We also know that we might be outcast from that group. The voices would say, "Hey, what's the matter with you? We are only having a little fun." And any friends we might have had in that group are gone.

Now, knowing that this might be the reaction, but wanting to help, we can do two things. We can do nothing at all. We can think to ourselves, "Gee, that's not very nice; somebody ought to help that kid. I wish they would leave him alone." For all the good that this does, we might just as well contribute to the cut session, or be five thousand miles away. The result is the same: The kid is getting cut down, and no one is doing anything about it. The second course is to do what we can to help: to change the topic, tactfully say something nice about the kid, say, "aw, c'mon, let's leave him alone," or, if necessary, really stand up and say, "Damn it, leave him alone." This does some good: The kid has a defender, the cuts stop, or at least are shared.

We often hear it said, "Inside, he has a good heart. He may have done such-and- such a bad thing, but basically he is a good person; his heart is in the right place."

such a bad thing, but basically he is a good person; his heart is in the right place." So what? What actual

difference does it make to you or me or to anyone if a person wants to do right, but does wrong because he is too weak, too gutless to do what he knows he should? What we do is important, not what we think we should do ...but just can't. I would rather have it said of me that I was basically a bad person who, nevertheless, never hurt anyone and was civil with people, than to have it said that I was basically a good person who didn't have the courage to do what I knew I should. A good man without courage is like a brand new car without gas, or a great ship without wind: all three are motionless and useless.

There are two kinds of courage that I would like you to think about. All of us have selfish desires and bad impulses; we get hungry, tired, cold, angry, lustful, greedy, proud, and a hundred other things. It takes a very real kind of courage to stand up to ourselves and say, "No, do what is right." When we are starved in that endless half hour before lunch and we pass a cookie box in an empty dorm, it takes guts to say to ourselves, "Shut up, selfish voice! I know he won't notice if I take one, but they are his cookies and I won't lower myself to steal." When, during a test at school, we are stumped for an answer, and we know that Joe Brain beside us has it, and we could see it with no effort and nobody would know, then it takes guts to say to ourselves, "You chicken, don't you dare consider cheating. Do your own test. Think of the answer yourself or get it wrong like a man."

The best illustration I can give of the kind of courage I am talking about is an experience of mine last winter. I was at a houseparty in northern New Hampshire with some college friends. The house where we were staying had a pantry that was divided into two sections. Half contained food provided by us for ourselves; the other half contained food for the family that was also staying there. We could help ourselves to the food we had provided, but were supposed to leave the other alone. One night quite late I came into the pantry starved, and I happened to notice an open box of dried apricots, which I love, on the shelf in the family's half. Immediately my conscience spoke to me and said, "Leave them alone; they don't belong to you." I reached up and helped myself to a handful. The fact that I remember it now shows what I think of the action. It was certainly no major sin, but the fact remains that I had stolen about ten cents worth of apricots. I wish I had had the courage to deny myself.

The courage to resist pressures from outside ourselves is even tougher. For those at school there is the awful challenge of peer pressure. In my opinion, almost nothing takes more courage than for someone to stand up to his classmates and say, "Leave that kid alone," or, "No thanks, it's against the rules," or "Joe, I saw you cheating on that paper. You shouldn't do that, and you had better stop it or I will have to turn you in." The way things are in school, the person who says this kind of thing is always made to suffer for it; he is out of the cool group forever. To face this and do what is right takes the most admirable kind of pure courage.

Well now, what can we do to develop courage, to make stronger in ourselves this most necessary quality? I have a few suggestions. First, keep reminding yourself of what is most important — the values you are trying to defend, or your own comfort and social ease. Second, use the help and support of those good people who you know believe in the things you do. Simply thinking about what my Pasquaney friends would do, and that they would be proud of me for doing it, has been a source of great courage for me, and on several occasions I have turned to them by phone for help. Third, practice; work at it. In no area does the progression hold more true:

help. Third, practice; work at it. In no area does the progression hold more true: Sow an act of courage, we will reap a habit of courage; sow a habit of courage, we will reap a strong, courageous character; sow a courageous character, and there is no doubt our destinies will be of great worth. Every time we act with

courage, no matter how minor the occasion, we strengthen ourselves for the next test. Fourth, have confidence that no matter how much your weak and childish friends may taunt you for your acts of courage, ultimately, and sooner than you think, your life will be more happy and your friendships more rewarding than they would have been if you had taken the easy way.

How will we act when tests come this year? Will we join the cut session? Stand by cowardly? Or do something to end it?

Will we look at the answer and use it as our own? Or will we go on to the next question and hope we remember before the end of the class?

Will I have another handful of apricots? Or will I stay hungry but honest?

The way we respond to these and other challenges depends almost entirely on our courage.

I want to conclude by reading from Hymn 519, the first two verses of which are a beautiful and compelling call to be more courageous:

Once to every man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good and evil side;
Some great cause, God's new Messiah,
Offering each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
Twixt that darkness and that light.
Then to side with truth is noble,
When we share her wretched crust,
Ere here cause bring fame and profit
And 'tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses,
While the coward stands aside
Till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied.

The courage to live by our convictions is the most important element of character. Without it there can be no excellence, no true righteousness, no glory, no Godliness — nothing but a timid and shamefaced slavery to the changing opinion of the time. With it, a man is free to grow and act to the limits of his great potential; not only will he be content and at peace with himself, but his days will have their full measure of fulfillment and joy, and the world will be a brighter, better place because he lived. We must have courage, friends, we must demand it of ourselves. May God give us all the vision to see, and the strength, the courage, to do whatever is right.