

Tied-Down Rudders

II Corinthians 3:6

Who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of a letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

We have heard people say, "I'll never do this or that." A parent may say, "I'll never break up housekeeping and go live with any of my children." I hope such a person may never have to, but I prefer to deal with the aged person who can grow old gracefully and say, maybe with a grin, "I've stopped saying what I will or won't do. There may come times when I'll have to do differently from what I'd like to do, if I'm to be a Christian."

A ship's rudder is the apparatus that guides the ship, or as the dictionary says, "the frame of wood or metal by which a vessel is steered." Some minds are by nature, or by training, dogmatic. They have tied down the rudder of their boat. They have been taught or have decided upon a certain course of travel. Having pointed the direction along this course, they fasten the rudder. Thus they feel safe. They have no new decisions to make. This would be fine and commendable but for the fact that life can't be lived fully that way. We are meant to steer and cannot evade the responsibility. Experienced sailors know that while gentle breezes blow it may do to fasten the rudder for a while. But when the winds rise the rudder must be free. Those who stubbornly keep the rudder tied down may capsized.

This fact, which is so applicable to ships, is just as applicable to life. To fasten the rudder is to court danger; to be inflexible is to be brittle. When the storms of life rage, many dogmatically-minded people break. Our age displays a staggering number of mental and nervous break-downs, and the anxious people who walk the edge of sanity far outnumber those in hospitals. They confuse their rigidity with their security. They tell themselves that their dogmatism is their faith. All of us who drive know the jerk of the automobile steering wheel when it strikes a small stone, even on a straight stretch of road.

The dogmatic person thinks that he honors faith by trusting it to the point where he has tied down the rudder. He does not understand faith, on the contrary, is not a set of rules but a living trust. Faith follows a dependable direction and knows enough to take into account the varying currents of life and thought, which every person must meet.

The opposite of the dogmatic mind is the mind that drifts. Where the dogmatic person has tied down his rudder, the drifter has let go of it. He refuses to steer. Whereas the dogmatic person sets his course straight toward the goal and

refuses to make such changes, as temporary conditions require, the drifter has no goal. Either he knows of no goal or else considers that reaching it is too hard or unlikely.

With all our adjustments, however, God remains the ever-faithful director. We cannot predict His ways in detail, for His ways are high as heaven beyond our understanding. But we can trust him completely from day to day; even as the child cannot tell what his mother's love may bring him in detail in the distant future but can yet trust her for every tomorrow.

The dogmatic person in a way has nowhere to go, for he considers himself already to have arrived. If you are perfect, you can't be more perfect. He feels no need for new truth and no challenge to adjust his course to the condition of life. He is frozen stiff in his own past. The drifting person is equally goalless. He lacks drive. He feels insecure, bored and anxious. The directed person, on the other hand, is intent on the goal while at the same time free to enjoy the thrill of steering toward it. As he moves forward, quietly or through storms, he feels the call of the home port.

If we are to see rightly we must have our lives focused for distance. When the camera is set for 15ft. and we try to get a picture of the distant mountains, we just don't. Yet what gets a successful picture of a distant scene will produce only a blurred close-up. Religion deals with things eternal. It sees even the things of men in the light of God. When we are to know God truly we cannot think in terms of near and narrow. When we are to view the eternal we look beyond those things, which pass away.

There is hardly a camera fan who does not enjoy color photography. Yet in life most of us are still taking our impressions of the world in black and white. We are all-or-nothing people. Everything is good or bad. You remember John telling Jesus, "Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us, and we forbid him, because he followeth not us." He was not a Methodist, or he did not believe as we, or he couldn't produce a union card or give the pass word. He must either be in or out. But Jesus said, "Forbid him not; for there is no man who shall do a miracle in my name that can lightly speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is for us."

When life is seen in the full light of God's work it is always full of color. Not only are there shades of gray, but also there are great glories of colors, which have little to do with the question of black or white. The colors are there to enjoy. In black or white we have to choose. Life is totally serious. But seen in color, life is to be lived and enjoyed.

Thus reminds us of the young Scottish preacher who, because of the heavy snowfall, used skis to get to his church on Sunday. The long-faced elders frowned upon such abuse of the Sabbath and called the young curate on the carpet. It was finally agreed that he was justified in trying to keep his appointment; but the whole matter of right or wrong was to depend - "Young man, did you enjoy it?" The

implication being that if he enjoyed it, it was evil. Religion is not full and deep if there is no realm of beauty apart from decision; no time for play beyond moral striving; no experience of the sheer joy of living quite outside the realm of demanding law.

Too much of religious thought is shallow. It sees a problem in one dimension, when the answer calls for many. Only the many dimensions give depth and depth gives truth. Take the question as to whether or not man is good. Some say “yes” and some answer “no” in one flat dimension. Any true answer, however, is complex. In the sense that no amount of effort can satisfy the love of God, man is completely lost and completely sinful. If two men were obliged to leap across a swift and deep river, 50 ft. wide, it would make no difference at all if one of them could jump only 5 ft. while the other could boast of jumping 9 t. If neither could swim, both would drown. No man by washing the supper dishes or giving his wife jewels gives her thereby his whole love. If he loves her he naturally will try both to help her and to give her presents, but doing and giving never in themselves become loving. Arguments most often arise among those who, not having taken their pictures in the right dimensions hold up as “the truth” their snapshots.

The letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life. Jesus is quoted as saying to his disciples, “I have other things to say unto you, but you cannot bear them now.” When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into truth.” (John 16:12). God is the God of truth and if it is true in the Bible or outside the Bible it is still God’s truth. If you learn that something you had believed about the Bible or God is not true or that there is additional truth don’t fear it. Don’t be like Mary at the tomb – “They have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him.” Don’t tie your rudder down and say, “If he isn’t just where I expect him, it can’t be God.” Don’t demand that God’s guidance come in the way you prescribe or you will refuse to accept it.

The Pharisees had tied down the rudder. They had the law. They were the people of the Book. They were inflexible. Can any good thing come out of Nazareth? I had a member once who was opposed to seeing religious moving pictures in the church. He had no objection to pictures so long as they were still; or if a teacher of children used several pictures to teach it was O.K.; but sin entered when the pictures moved rapidly. He had written down in his book “movies are wrong”, and that meant al movies. He would be rigid and brittle. He was not quite secure; therefore he would be dogmatic. There could be no exceptions.

The letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life – harsh unsympathetic law – the medicine is bitter, but take it, ‘cause it’s good for you’. Dr. Richard Young, Chaplain at Baptist Hospital, tells of having a 12-year-old boy being forced to come to see him by harsh parents who didn’t understand him. He knew the boy would resist any effort on his part to help him under such conditions. So Dr. Young told him he understood how he felt. The boy was told he could sit in the office while he worked

to satisfy his parents; and of course, if he wanted to talk to him about anything, then or later, he'd be glad to talk with him. With that treatment the doctor made a friend.

It is sometimes selfishness or saving face that makes people tie down the rudder. He has said he would do so and never change. You remember Jesus charging the Pharisees with making their traditions more important than the word of God. Their traditions were given the name of being religious traditions and so God's command was set aside.

I am not unsympathetic with this dogmatic type of mind if he is sincere. My observation is that so often he can't work with other Christians who, are just as sincere as he and may have more of the love of Christ in their hearts than he. I believe there is a more excellent way because the letter killeth but the Spirit giveth life.

Our Father, we are told in Scripture that thou hast made us just a little lower than angels and sometimes we feel like we are closing the gap, only to see how far we are from what we ought to be.

...We know, if we stop to meditate, that thy Spirit broods over us, seeking to be our guide and companion of life's way. But while we know this, we have our own plans we want to follow until that far off, indefinite date when we think we'll be ready to follow Thy way.

....To ease our conscience we engage in some tasks for Thy Church. We think that doing God's work can satisfy the need for doing God's will.

....Let us learn to wait on God as well as to work for God. We confess that we have too often relied only on our work and wisdom to do Thy work when we should have sought first Thy power.

....Forgive us, we pray. Amen