

OVERCOMING THE INFERIORITY COMPLEX

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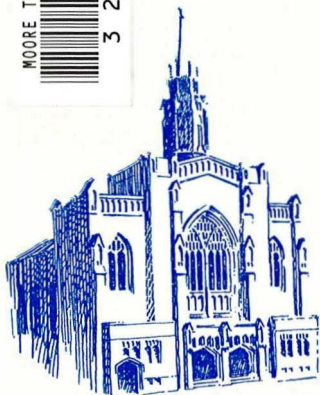


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OVERCOMING THE INFERIORITY COMPLEX

Matthew 5:5 "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth."

Years ago a young man came to see me. As he sat in the chair, clasping and unclasping his hands, he discussed the weather, the latest football game, and many other things which obviously had nothing to do with the real purpose of his visit. Finally, after a considerable pause, he burst out—"What can you do about an inferiority complex?" As he said it, his face reddened. Realising he was blushing, he tried to stop it, but of course that only made things worse. I felt almost as embarrassed as he did. Being a young minister at the time I don't know that I gave him all the help I would have liked. Since then I've had to do with hundreds of people with the problem. I have studied the advice of trained counsellors and the wisdom of the Bible.

Everybody has feelings of inferiority at certain times, especially in the presence of people more gifted than themselves. Not everybody has an inferiority complex in the true sense of the term. This has been defined as,

"An emotional idea of the self or ego, whose unconscious activity gives the sufferer an attitude of inferiority towards himself. It has its origin in a wounded narcissism or self-love, and may lead to neurosis which causes a person to doubt his capacity."

Thousands of people who don't have an inferiority complex in this strict sense still assure you they do have such a complex. This conviction darkens their lives and certainly interferes with the development of an integrated, happy and strong personality. In what follows I will be using the expression 'inferiority complex' more in the popular sense than in the technical. On this basis let us consider eight things we can do about this embarrassing affliction.

1. BE THANKFUL YOU HAVE AN INFERIORITY COMPLEX

If you did not feel inferior you would have little incentive to learn anything. The desire to be superior, or at least to keep up with the Joneses, is a great incentive not only to learn but to work and progress generally—"to scorn delights and live laborious days."

It is surely far better to have an inferiority complex than to have a superiority complex. It is difficult to live with people who are know-alls, people who are so sure they are right they must have their own way all the time. Many who have a superiority complex to a serious degree find it impossible to adjust to society and end up in mental hospitals. On the other hand, those with an inferiority complex, though they may suffer more inwardly at first, do become better adjusted and this is why the meek inherit the earth.

I thought of this recently when reading an article on the two men confronting one another in the British Election in October, 1964. Mr. Harold Wilson and Sir Alec Douglas-Home. It would be hard to get two men with a greater contrast in back-grounds and yet in the popular sense both have suffered from inferiority complexes. Sir Alec, the former fourteenth Earl of Home, grew up in a castle. Harold Wilson was born in the soot-begrimed industrial city of Huddersfield, the son

of an industrial chemist. If you have been in Britain and sensed the class-consciousness there, you can understand how Harold Wilson, in spite of an Oxford education and early promotion in Attlee's government must have to battle with an inferiority complex to this day. They say that when he is talking with you he has a habit of looking past you, an indication of his shyness. On the other hand Sir Alec Douglas-Home, like a good many of his fellow Scots, is by nature reserved. Nobody ever considered him a man of great talent and when he entered politics it was more from a motive of 'noblesse oblige' than because he or anybody else foresaw any great future for him in this sphere. Yet when Mr. Macmillan picked him out from among several other much more brilliant competitors, his own mother, the Dowager Countess of Home, expressed the feelings of millions when she said, "I would never have thought Alec would one day be Prime Minister." Why then did these two men rise to the top? Because they were meek. They could adjust themselves to others. They had learned to be adaptable in the sense of sinking personal viewpoints and desires for the sake of the majority. People trusted them more than they trusted others who, being conscious of greater ability were more aggressive. So it is no great handicap to have an inferiority complex, but when the great opportunity comes, when the call comes, it would be a sin to nurture such a complex and fail to rise to the occasion.

2. ANALYSE IT

To control an inferiority complex and curb its capacity to darken and restrict your life, it is a good thing to begin by analysing yourself. To do this, take a sheet of paper and write down all the reasons why you feel inferior. In your childhood you might have been

neglected, or you might have been spoilt, you might have been physically afflicted in some way, or you might have suffered some psychological shock. Having done this, face the fact that none of us can alter the past or re-live our childhood over again. Accept the past mentally and emotionally. Then write down anything you think can be done now about rectifying or compensating for these unfortunate things in the past. If there is anything that can be done, it is good to take immediate steps so that in days to come vain regrets about what is now the present won't be added to vain regrets about what is already past. While writing down the negative things, be sure to make another list of your assets. If we count all our blessings we normally find they far outweigh the handicaps. 'In everything give thanks,' says the Bible and nothing keeps the mind healthier than the spirit of thanksgiving.

In making such an analysis as this a common mistake is to assume that all our troubles stem from early childhood. It is all too easy then to transfer the blame to our parents. As a parent I know parents are not always blameless even though the vast majority try to do their best. If the trouble has stemmed from very early childhood it may be necessary to get help from a trained psychologist, or even a psychiatrist, especially if symptoms are severe. On the other hand, let us not overlook the possibility that the origin of an 'inferiority complex' may be something comparatively recent. For example Dr. Louis E. Bisch records the case of a top-flight executive at the age of 50, earning 50,000 dollars a year. Tall and strong, so able that the Government called him in for consultation during the war, he was highly successful in business and admired on all sides. Yet his wife was now worried about him because he began to complain of head-aches, was not sleeping,

was impatient and irritable. Formerly gregarious, he now preferred to be alone. Once or twice she found him weeping and he even talked of putting an end to it all. This great man developed such feelings of inferiority that he felt he could not cope any longer. Why? It did not take a psychiatrist very long to decide that he was passing through the male climacteric. The doctor prescribed certain treatment, but the best thing he did for him was to say, "Don't worry. These things come to pass. They come—but give them time—they will pass. Just take life one day at a time."

3. ACCEPT CRITICISM

A person suffering from an inferiority complex is naturally very sensitive to criticism. I remember one man whose outward aggressiveness concealed, as it often does, a deep-seated inferiority complex. One day in the course of what he regarded as his public duty, he carried out a certain operation which caused great offence to a section of the community. He showed me a letter rebuking him and he read to me the stinging reply which he had composed. He was certainly giving them more than he had received, but what good did it do? It turned his critics into permanent enemies and he himself learned absolutely nothing. Had he said to himself, "Is there anything in this criticism? Have I been mistaken?", he might have realised that though it was his duty to do what he had done, there were better ways of doing it. Not only that, but the Bible says, "A soft answer turneth away wrath." (Proverbs 15:1). A different reply might have turned his critics into friends and won them to his side in the reform he was trying to carry out. On both counts his inferiority complex, instead of being intensified, might have been considerably reduced.

4. ACCEPT YOURSELF AS YOU ARE

A baby doesn't begin life with an inferiority complex, rather the reverse. But as he grows older he develops one. Why? Because he compares himself with other people. This is true even of people who by nature are highly gifted. As we think of the regal figure of the late Queen Mary, wife of King George V, about the last thing that would occur to us would be the thought that she was once afflicted with an inferiority complex. Yet, as a teen-ager this was such a problem to her she spent many hours in tears. In his recent autobiography Charlie Chaplin, in some respects the most successful film star of all time, tells us that shyness and self-consciousness have afflicted him all his life — even in the years of his greatest fame and popularity.

We think of George Bernard Shaw as a supreme example of an egotist and an aggressive personality. Yet in his younger days he was known to walk up and down in the street outside a house for an hour before going in for an interview. Another whose life was largely spent seeking compensation for feelings of inferiority (in this case because of his shortness) was the heroic T. E. Lawrence of Arabia, a great admirer of Shaw, whose name he adopted. We are certainly in good company if we have this kind of complex. We don't need to be ashamed of it. At the same time we should do what we can to control it. To achieve this, it is wise to accept ourselves as we are.

The man with the one talent developed an inferiority complex because he kept comparing himself with the more favoured servants who had more talents. But God doesn't expect us to develop talents He has not bestowed upon us. He does expect us to do the best with what we have—to His glory. Thousands of brilliant people break down because they try to develop all their talents and excel in everything, while the

humble person, content with only one talent and steadily developing it through the years leaves a much greater contribution, and meanwhile has lived a happy life. On the ninth morning of every month I always feel better when I include in my own devotions the words Principal John Baillie has in his **DIARY OF PRIVATE PRAYER** for that day—

“It is Thou who hast put power into my hand to do one work and hast withheld the skill to do another . . . The good that I would I do not, but the good that Thou wiltest in me, that Thou canst give me power to do.”

5. GET A PURPOSE RELATED TO THE TALENTS YOU DO POSSESS.

Years ago I knew a man who spent all his spare time making a model of the city of New York. He had never been out of Australia, but photographs of New York fascinated him and he had constructed this model from them. People came from near and far to see it. Apart from this one thing he was a very humble person who wasn't particularly good at anything. But by concentrating on one purpose he had achieved something worthwhile. Any talent can be developed if we work at it and give enough time to it. The most brilliant person on earth has only the same amount of time as you and I have—twenty-four hours a day. It is what we do with this precious commodity that determines whether we are wasting the talents God has given us, or developing them to His glory.

It is my firm conviction that God has a plan for every life and that plan is related to the talents which He sees fit to bestow upon us. If we seek His will in regard to that plan and then be content to work at that steadily over the years, that one increasing purpose will get our minds off ourselves and bring to us

increasing satisfaction. The best cure for any complex is to get the mind off the self. Further, if you believe that you are working with God along the lines of the purpose He has chosen, frustration and disappointment will not bother you nearly so much. I think of a student friend of mine who slaved night and day to qualify for a Rhodes Scholarship. Many of us thought he had an excellent chance, but he was not elected. For a couple of days after the decision he was a picture of disappointment and despair. But he had committed his life to Christ and he came to believe that God does not shut one door without opening another. In due course, the work which he had put in for the Rhodes Scholarship qualified him for another quite different award. As it turned out, this second scholarship was of far greater benefit to him in his later career than the Rhodes, even though it had less kudos.

6. KEEP CLOSE TO CHRIST

Many people believe that the Apostle Paul suffered from an inferiority complex. He took his name from the Latin word 'paulus' meaning 'little.' Yet has any man so changed human history as he did? How did he do it? Certainly he was a 'ten-talent man.' He was born into a good family and educated at a great university. Many things were in his favour, but he was making a mess of his life until he said to the unseen but living Christ, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" After that he was able to say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." "If God be for us who can be against us." "In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us." (Philippians 4:13; Romans 8:31, 37).

How do we keep close to Christ? In worship week by week and especially by partaking of the sacrament of communion. In daily devotions. In reading the

Bible. If reading the Scriptures does nothing else it will remind us again and again that an inferiority complex in a young person can be a positive asset because of the future to which it can lead. Take Moses for example. We still say "Meek as Moses." He was naturally shy and was overwhelmed by a great sense of failure. He tried to lose himself in the wilderness. But at the burning bush Moses experienced the presence of God and heard His call to lead the people out of Egypt. The very thought terrified him, but God said, "Certainly I will be with thee." The man with the inferiority complex became the greatest leader his people ever had. Similar experiences came to Gideon and Jeremiah, the Apostle Peter, Timothy and so many others. There is nothing like reading the Bible to get your perspective straight or to remind you that there is a Power Greater than Yourself.

7. DO SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR GUILT FEELINGS

The nearer we come to Christ the more conscious we are of our sin and unworthiness. All of us have dark things in the past we wish were not there. Too many people are prisoners of bad habits today. These things really produce an inferiority complex. The answer is not—as some so-called intellectuals would have you believe—to get away from Christ and give up your religion altogether. The answer is to come nearer still until His power becomes a real force in your personality. As Charles Wesley sang in his hymn, 'O for a thousand tongues,'

He breaks the power of cancelled sin
He sets the prisoner free.

What a wonderful thing it is to know that you can have a completely fresh start in life. By faith in Christ

the past can be wiped clean. He says to every repentant sinner, 'Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more.' (John 8:11).

8. REMEMBER THE MEEK DO INHERIT THE EARTH

I can never think of this text without seeing in my mind's eye a lunch-hour service in the Scots Church, Melbourne, at which the world famous author, the Rev. F. W. Boreham was preaching. He pointed out that the principle enunciated by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount that the meek inherit the earth is well illustrated in the animal kingdom. What animals are multiplying and inheriting the earth? The strong, aggressive animals like lions, tigers, jackals? Not at all. These animals are in danger of becoming extinct. The animals which inherit the earth are gentle, meek, docile animals like sheep, cows, horses, cats. The Greek word 'praos,' translated 'meek' in our text, is used of animals like horses which have been 'tamed.' Those whose wild-animal natures have been tamed by Christ and who are obedient to Him are the ones who inherit the earth.

I have just quoted Dr. F. W. Boreham. His life is an excellent example of how valuable an inferiority complex can be. He was a naturally shy person and for many years found it difficult to make small talk. Then in his youth, his work taking him to a railway yard, he was involved in an accident and he lost part of one leg. Never again could he take part in the sport he loved. He felt restricted and handicapped. Answering the call to the ministry he had only two year's training in Spurgeon's College in London. Then he was sent out to the Church at Mosgiel near Dunedin. He felt inferior because of his lack of education so he resolved to read two books every week to com-

plete his training. He kept this up for years until he became, at one time, probably the most popular religious author in the world. His books sold a million copies. The humble man, the man with the inferiority complex, F. W. Boreham was an illustration of his own text when he preached that sermon on, "The meek shall inherit the earth."

BOOKS. The following books by the Rev. Gordon Powell may be obtained through any bookseller, or by post from the Assembly Book Shop, 44 Margaret Street, Sydney.

Happiness is a Habit	11/3	11d. (Postage)
(Paperback)	5/6	8d.
The Blessing of Belief	11/3	11d.
(Paperback)	6/9	8d.
The Secret of Serenity	14/6	11d.
Freedom From Fear	11/3	11d.
Personal Peace and Power	12/6	11d.
Two Steps to Tokyo (P'back)	3/9	11d.
New Solutions to Difficult Sayings of Jesus	14/6	11d.
The Innkeeper of Bethlehem	7/6	8d.
The Shepherd of Bethlehem	7/6	8d.
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