

Tempers, and What to do With Them

F.B. Meyer:

WHAT a shadow is cast over lives and homes by bad tempers! It is Sunday morning, God's day of rest and peace, when the worry and rush of the world should be quiet, and the voices of newspaper boys and hawkers of small wares should be still. A family of little children is waiting to be sweetened and blessed by God, mother, and father. But the mother has become put out over something; she speaks peevishly and crossly, her husband hardly dares put in a word, and the children are scared and talk to one another in whispers. Though there is everything in the pretty home to entrap the sunbeams that play without, a shadow lies over all and mars the day.

Or it is church-time, and the family is late; the husband and father is waiting, ready dressed, for the house of God, but mother or children are unready, and he calls for them, each time in more irritable tones; and when at last they appear, "Late again," "Always your way," "I am tired and out of patience with you," bring some sharp retort, and the rest of the walk to the sanctuary is either spent in silence, or the parents confine their observations to whichever child they happen to be walking with. What good will the service have after such an introduction?

How often has a happy day's excursion been spoiled in the same way! It has been the topic of conversation for weeks. The wife has been hurrying all her work to be ready. Such preparations in dress for herself and the children, such cooking of savory tartlets and cutting of sandwiches. The husband has got off for the day with no little planning. Sunshine augurs a happy excursion. But somehow things don't go right. Perhaps the husband is unreasonable and thoughtless, or gives the wife reason to think that he doesn't appreciate her careful provision; or, perhaps, she is over-tired and nervous, and misinterprets a remark meant quite innocently; but one crosses the other, and the ill-natured word, the sour look, the sulking manner, somehow make the whole party miserable--worse than a shower of rain would.

It is impossible to name all the various sorts of ill-temper which vex and curse humanity. The hot temper, which flashes out with the least provocation. The sullen temper, which is a great deal worse to deal with, because it takes so long to come round. The jealous temper, which, in trying to keep all for itself, loses all. The suspicious temper, which is always imputing the worst motives. The malicious temper, which loves to instil the drop of poison, or make the almost imperceptible stab with its stiletto. Ingenuity has sought to discover analogies to these and other forms of bad temper among the lower orders of the animal creation. This is mulish, and that bearish (with the additional allusion, in this case, to the misfortune of a sore head), and the other is viperish. These comparisons are a little hard on our humble friends and companions in this great Noah's ark. Could they speak, they might say that our sin has introduced the jar and discord into their lives that might otherwise have been peaceful and blessed.

People who have a temper are much to be pitied. They know when it is coming on, or has come, and wish they hadn't yielded, and hate themselves for being disagreeable; yet cannot shake themselves loose from the evil thing that has sprung on them as the jaguar on the antelope, or the ague on the traveller in the tropics. They are disposed, however, to fancy that they cannot help themselves. They have inherited it, as they did the color of their hair, or the shape of their nose. Their mother had it before them, and her father before her. If you want them, you must take them as they are or leave them; and then it is, after all, better to be as they are than like some whom they could name. "I grant you I have a hot temper, but then it soon burns itself out, and I am awfully sorry; and as every one must have something, I would rather have this than be unforgiving, or revengeful, or stupid." so I have heard people excuse themselves.

Now there is some truth, no doubt, in this talk about heredity. For good or ill, past generations have left their mark upon us; and parents, especially mothers, cannot too deeply ponder it in their hearts. What they are their children will become; and if there is a strong taint in the blood, an evil tendency in any special direction, there is the more reason why the mother should set herself resolutely to resist it, and replace it by the opposite. There is no doubt that this can be done. It has been done in thousands of instances, and may be done again.

It is impossible to estimate the value of good and sunny temper, which goes through life with a song; looking always on the bright side of things, and yielding to the blows of trial and disappointment with an unflinching grace. It is often associated with a sound constitution and abounding health, and there is undoubtedly a close connection between the two, but it is not dependent on these; for, as the great Dr. Arnold testified of his sister, who was for years a confirmed invalid, but whose chamber was the sunniest room in the house, so suffering and pain have often only set forth to greater advantage the well-spring of sweetness and good-nature which has poured forth like strains of sweet music amid the clatter of a dusty, noisy thoroughfare.

Tempers, and What to do With Them

But how may those afflicted with ill-temper be delivered? The Apostle says, "Laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil-speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:1-2). That laying aside is a remarkable expression, for it means that the thing may be done by one sudden, definite act. We are not to wait till these evil things die down in our hearts, but are to make up our minds, once and forever, to lay them aside; as a beggar his rags when new clothes are offered him. It is a definite act of the will. Will you make it now? Will you say, "From this moment I choose to be free of these things, and I deliberately put them off"?

But you fear that this will not help you, you have so often made good resolutions before and broken them. Then take one further step. Trust Christ to keep you. Look up to him and say, "Lord, I have often tried to keep my temper and failed, but from henceforth I entrust its keeping with thee." Expect him to undertake the charge. Every morning look up into his face .and say, " I am still trusting thee to be between me and my evil past, and to fill me with thy own sweetness, gentleness, and patience." In moments of provocation dare to trust him still, and to hold to the compact by which your helplessness and evil claim everything from his all-sufficiency. Live thus, and you will become known for the very opposite temper to that which has so often caused you poignant regret.