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37.

RELIGION HELPS US COMBAT CRIME

By Edward Thompson

Lawbreakers can change into useful citizens. Judge Edward Thompson, youngest magistrate in New York City, dramatically illustrates how the courts are helping offenders find a new outlook on life.

What can be done today to stop the increase in crime and lawlessness. The problem is so big and complex that there is no one solution.

We in the courts are trying to do something about it.

We are trying to reach inside many offenders to help them find a new self-respect and a new life as law-abiding citizens. To do this we have to use weapons much more tangible than laws and court orders. The needed inspiration and incentive to change criminal ways won't necessarily come from man-made laws.

But from God. Take the case of Mary Smith. That isn't her real name, but her story is real and it happened very recently. She stood before me one day, her clothes wrinkled and dirty, a tired, sullen look in her eyes. The charge -- disorderly conduct.

Fantastic Record

Her record was fantastic. Mary Smith, 54 years old-- with 53 previous convictions! The offenses, all minor, were generally the outcome of intoxication.

How could one human being so consistently degrade herself? Upon looking at her more closely, though, what I saw in her eyes was hopelessness, not an incurable villainess.

"Mary, what can I do for you? I asked her kindly.

Something vague flickered in her eyes. "Judge, you can give me another chance."

Snickers drifted through the courtroom. Mary was well known as an oft-convicted offender. Her request seemed ironically funny.

"Mary," I continued, "tell me what is the difference between this occasion and all the others?"

"Judge, this time I'm in love."

Outright laughter greeted this surprising statement. The idea of tawdry, unkempt Mary in love seemed ludicrous at that moment. I felt sorry for her, but the situation was not without humor.

"Who is the lucky man?" I asked gently.

"Mr. Otto Schmidt," she said after some hesitation.

A New Spirit

More smirks from the now interested court. For the first time, however, there was a new spirit in Mary's eyes as she flashed a defiant glance about her. The mention of this man's name roused her from her apathy.

I frowned over my court with rising resentment. Mary might be a hopeless offender, but she was a human being with feelings, and I did not intend to let the atmosphere of levity trample her spirit.

"Mary, is Mr. Schmidt in the court?" I asked.

In reply a tall, elderly man arose and moved forward, causing a new buzz of comment. Mr. Schmidt, a gentleman in his seventies, was well dressed with a poised, distinguished appearance.

As Mary saw Mr. Schmidt coming forward she began to smooth down her untidy hair in some agitation. Something in his eyes suddenly seemed to reassure her, however, and her shoulders straightened.

"Mr. Schmidt," I began, "Mary has stated that she is in love with you, that because of that love she would like another opportunity to prove she can become a good citizen. How do you feel about this?"

"No Criminal"

"I have loved Mary for three years now. She is no criminal," he said simply.

"Then why did you let her commit this offense?"

"I was away on a business trip Judge, if you will check the records, you will notice that this is her first arrest during the past three years."

A woman with 53 previous convictions certainly didn't seem like a fit subject for probation. Frankly I was reluctant to go out on a limb for Mary, yet what possible good would another prison sentence do? I felt that any person who had the capacity for love could not be incorrigibly bad. Suddenly I knew that the only possible way of salvaging Mary was to give her a chance to do it herself.

"Mary," I said, "I'm going to put you on indefinite probation because I believe you can and will become a good citizen. But there are several things I want you to do. First, you must give up drinking. Give it up completely."

She nodded vigorously.

"Go To Church"

"The other thing I want you to do, I continued, "is to go to church regularly and give God a chance to help you overcome your desire for alcohol. You may not realize it but loving Mr. Schmidt has brought you very close to God. Now try going to church--loving God--and see if it doesn't help you find a new self-respect and happiness."

Tears spilled over Mary's shabby clothes as she thanked me. Then she clasped her hands together-- and I saw her lips move in a silent prayer.

I had pinned my hopes on a powerful ally in religion, though. I was sure that if Mary took an active part in church life, as the reports stated she was doing, she would feel the effects in her own life. For living close to God inevitably brings on cleanliness, both of body and mind, in addition to self-respect.

Several months later I returned from another assignment. The court attendant greeted me in my office. "Mary was back," he deadpanned.

Something seemed to sag inside me, then came a sharp sense of futility. "I guess I should have known better than to let her off," I said unhappily.

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QUICKIES by Ken Reynolds



"You'll have to look in the Guardian Want Ads for a tractor--I just ain't strong enough to pull that plow again this year!"

have a happy ending, but more and more do each day. Most of the offenders are bewildered, unsettled people who need only a start in the right direction to overcome their criminal tendencies. Here is where religion can be of tremendous help. Some cases we assign directly to a clergyman. Others like Mary need only to be headed back to the church. Then, of course, some need considerable psychiatric treatment.

But the great dynamic cure comes from God.

TOMORROW -- A widely known theology professor, William L. Stidger, tells the inspiring story of his father, a saintly man whose devotion to his family gave them a rich life.

(From the magazine "Guideposts" and the book of the same name Copyright 1950 by Guideposts Associates Inc., Pawling, New York).

Going West "Oh, she wasn't locked up. She came just to see you. We didn't recognize her at first. Mary had on new clothes and looked like a million. She had the Probation Department's okay to go out West with her new husband--that Mr. Schmidt--but she wanted to thank you again before leaving."

"And, Judge," said the attendant with a knowing wink, "she said she wanted to kiss you good-bye!" I laughed happily. The feeling of futility was gone.

All such cases naturally do not

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