

# No Inferiority in Modern Youth, Richards Declares

## Places Responsibility for Actions of Present Day Youth with Parents

*Editor's Note: "What Our Generation Owes the Next" was the subject of a "straight from the shoulder" sermon preached by Rev. James Austin Richards at the Winnetka Congregational church on Sunday, February 10. The sermon made such a profound impression up Mr. Richards' congregation as to warrant spreading the message throughout the community, and it has therefore been decided to publish it in Winnetka Talk. Every parent in the Village should read this sermon in which Mr. Richards presents some common sense arguments that should have the effect of helping to clear up some of the problems of this "restless age."*

A SERMON BY REV.

JAMES A. RICHARDS

### WHAT OUR GENERATION OWES THE NEXT

Jeremiah 31:29—The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.

This ancient proverb is twice quoted in the Bible. Both here and in Ezekiel the writers insist it cannot mean that the guilt of parents is imputed to their children. But, although bereft of this application, the saying remains profound and searching.

Of late there has been a lot of blaming of youth, a lot of holding up of hands in horror, a lot of calling across a gulf of misunderstanding. "We never did that when we were young!"—probably as futile a thing as any adult can say. So far as this represents deep concern for youth and a sense of the ultimate importance of character, it is all to the good. But the question has to be raised whether this attitude does not miss that main point after all. It assumes that today's youth are of a different blood from that of their elders, that they by some new perversity freshly come out of the pit.

#### Scouts Heredity Argument

I am not prepared to admit any wholesale moral inferiority in the youth of today. Indeed, my own experience would suggest many comparisons distinctly in their favor. But I do insist that in areas of life where the youth of today are slipping you must take more than youth into account. Never mind the old debate whether heredity or environment is the greater influence. For my argument it is enough that between them they hold the field and that youth makes neither of them. Youth surely does not make its heredity, neither does it make its environment. If, where, whenever youth is slipping, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge."

#### Influence of the War

One of the commonest devices is to blame the shortcomings of youth on the war. The war is being overworked as an explanation of social phenomena, but that its effect on youth was adverse is beyond question. You cannot wrench millions of boys from home and every natural human contact; you cannot herd hundreds of thousands of girls in factories; you cannot teach youth its one immediate business is to kill, without debasing the souls of the youth. Much of the present immensely lowered opposition to immorality and loss of the sense of the sanctity of life was at least furthered by the war. But who made the war. Not youth. It is the immemorial curse of youth that it must fight the wars that older people make. The guilt of the parents does not descend to the children, but the children have to atone for the sins of the parents just the same. When I see the moral wreckage the war has brought to youth, I still have to say, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth have been set on edge."

#### "Moral Flabbiness"

The study of cases makes this more vivid and forecasts much of the rest of what I have to say. A great teacher of boys has told of a lad expelled after making a hopeless mess of his school life. Whereupon his mother appeared to plead for him, to discourse on his fine nature, to say no one but she had ever understood him, to assert that if people were imprisoned in a burning building he would be the first to rush in to save them. The teacher could do nothing but express his regret, he could not furnish the burning building for the demonstration. But since then he has been asking a question none has been able to answer, "What possible chance has that boy against the handi-

cap of such moral flabbiness in his mother?"

Principal Stearns of Andover tells of another boy dismissed from school for a palpable fault. He was one of three brothers, all star athletes. The brothers rose in wrath and said they would go to the Principal and acquiesced. The three got part way home and wired father for needed funds. Instead, the father came and met the boys and all four went back to Andover. They filed into the Principal's office. The conversation was something like this: "So you've fired my boy?" "Yes!" "And the other two will not leave school, and him?" "Yes." "Well, I'm here to say the other two will not leave school, and to say further that if you had not fired the one I'd have taken all three away myself." Another question which has never been answered—Why should anyone wonder that all the sons of that man made good?

Judge Franklin C. Hoyt, through whose court ten thousand children pass each year, says that we are faced not with the problem of delinquent children, but with the problem of delinquent parents. "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

#### Responsibility

But, more positively, what does this generation owe to the next? I have no hopes of giving more than fragmentary answers in a matter where I am myself but a first grade learner.

Of course the first thing we owe them is a full recognition of our own responsibility. The improvement of school education, the lengthening of school hours till they even supervise the play of our children, the most careful selection of the household helpers who share in the care of the children—these are in no sense substitutes for direct, continuous, responsible contact with the children and care for them by the parents themselves. I honor the mother who with three expert maids in the house would as soon have gone without her meals as allow any but herself to give the children their daily baths. The fashioning of the deepest tastes and impulses and "love-images," that will later exercise an imperious control over the whole life and often dictate its whole destiny, begins very early, even in infancy. To vacate one's responsibility then is often to vacate all possibility of ever being real parents at all.

#### Imitation

In the second place, we must realize youth's unconscious imitation of us, even of things of which we are unconscious in ourselves. Here is something that should make the strongest man pause and kneel and pray and rise and struggle that his life may be cleansed of its most secret faults. "What you see speaks so loud I can not hear what you say!" How often is Emerson's sentence true in your home and mine! Psychologists tell us that talk and language below the standard are dangerous even in the presence of sleeping children, so unconscious is their imitation. We ought to try to make our children far, far better than we are. But we have no right idly to assume they will be. We must face our responsibility and realize that deeds and moods and attitudes weight more than precepts, commands, and lectures.

#### Honesty

That leads directly to the third thing we owe—honesty, scrupulous, comprehensive, pervasive honesty. How little there is of it! At least, how many homes and parents seem to know nothing of it! How many relationships between elders and youngsters are altogether vitiated by subtle dishonesties! A five year old stood on her front steps as her parents drove away and remarked, "There go the two greatest liars in the state of Michigan." Why? Because for days he had been promising to take her "tomorrow" and had never done it. What chance was there left for any helpful or happy influence of those parents over that child? Yet have you never risked the same thing? Have you never made threats you had no idea of ever carrying out, regardless of the fact that thereby you risked pulling down the whole integrity of the moral universe about your child's ears? Again and again, even in Winnetka, I hear parents calmly reporting deliberate untruths they have told their children, because the falsehoods were immediately effective for managing them, without any apparent suspicion that such a course is a sure prophecy of the time, not far away, when they will not be able to manage them at all after the children discover that they are liars. The heart of a child is the keenest detective in the world.

#### Can't Improve on Truth

Nor does such dishonesty only wreck home relationships. It often deprives the child of that on which all beings have the highest claim—the truth. It is a strange audacity that we should think we can improve on the truth. It is a human infidelity, the very sum of all infidelities, that we should distrust the truth. I shall not enlarge on it, but I know and you know that the path of life is crowded with those that were wrecked in youth because, when the first questions were asked about how God made us, the sacred functions of the body, about the meaning of birth and the way in which God has most obviously bound the generations together, they were met by those



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who had the audacity to think they could improve on the truth. The questions ought to have been answered in holy and complete honesty. Instead they were met with falsehoods or by an embarrassed postponement and the children were sent to the gutter to learn some truth and more falsehood and to have all the sanctities of life drenched and stained with filth.

It was a child who had been repeatedly deceived who said, "Well, I'm on to Santa Claus and now I think I'll look into this Jesus business." I don't remember at all where I heard it, but it comes to me through memory like the wail of a doomed soul. I often paraphrase the words of Jesus, It were better for a man to have a great millstone tied about his neck and be thrown in the midst of the sea than that he lie to a child.

#### Reality

Close to this is the fourth thing we owe—immediate contact with reality. Parents and teachers often seek a middle course between the spoiling and indulgent attitude and the overbearing and repressive attitude. The way through is suggested by Prof. Edwin B. Holt. He pictures two mothers, both eager to keep their children from getting burned. One sees to it the child never comes near any flames or radiator. The other deliberately brings the finger near enough to feel the heat and understand. The first makes the child's conduct a "function of the mother." The second makes it a "function of reality." Prof. Holt prophesies that ten years later the first mother will be a nervous wreck, while the second will be saying, "Johnnie, get the matches and light the lamp and put it on the table." As rapidly as possible, we must pass the stage where our children's conduct is a function of ourselves and make it a function of reality. For the time comes when parents and children must part. It may be by the death of the one or the marriage of the other. Then woe is unto those children if their morality has not learned to stand on its own feet.

#### Independence

This suggests another point—the need of moral independence. Judge Hoyt says one reason so many thousand chil-

dren troop through his court is that parents weakly allow their children liberties because other parents do. "Because others do!" Where life is so compact as in Winnetka, how often do we hear that argument and how often do we feel its force? We have no clearer obligation to our children than to train them in moral independence, to bring them some early revelation that a thing is not necessarily wise and right because many do it. And we'd better begin demonstrating this to our children by exercising more moral independence ourselves.

#### Religion

Finally, we owe it to the next generation to give religion a chance. There is a debate as to whether religion can be taught. It is largely a matter of the definition of terms. Religion cannot be done up in a package like some of the facts of history and handed across the table as one passes the salt. But religion can be revealed. It can be given a chance. Youth can be exposed to it. There is something very moving in the unanimity with which parents want their children to be religious. There is something equally alarming in their common failure to face their own responsibility in the matter. There is no place like home for the catching of religion. There are none like parents to expose the children. Religion is the most precious thing in the world, the most protective, beautifying, fertilizing, creative, joyful. To how much of its contagion is a child in your home exposed? Is it exposed there to the greed of things, to the ambitions of social life, to all the clamors and hastes of these modern days, but not at all to religion?

Compare this home with the home with the true religious spirit. That spirit may find partial expression through grace at meals and family prayers. It will certainly find expression through frequent religious conversations, constant references to religious ideals and standards, reasonable participation in religious activities, and a sense that all life is bathed in God.

To be reared in such a home is the very first right of every child. We owe it to the next generation to see it is reared in such homes, with those who face their responsibilities, realize

youth's unconscious imitations, are honest, are real, are morally independent, and give religion a chance. Then men shall no more say, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."

Winnetka Congregational Church  
February 10, '24.

## PAY YOUR INCOME TAX QUARTERLY—REINECKE

"Pay your income tax in quarterly installments," is the advice of Collector, Mabel G. Reinecke of the northern Illinois district. Internal Revenue Service.

The reason for stressing this method of meeting the government requirements is that in case the proposed revision of the income tax law is adopted and becomes retroactive to include the 1923 returns, it will be a comparatively simple matter to adjust the last quarterly payment to the provisions of the law.

"If you delay beyond March 15 in making your returns and first payments, you become liable to a severe penalty," the collector declares.

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