

"MAKING ALIBIS DO DUTY FOR SELF-BLAME"

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5-14
I Kings 19:9-18

I. Excuses, evasions, rationalizations are resorted to by us all. They are handy and convenient devices and soothing to complacency and egoism. We can't bear to be put in the wrong. We are on our feet in an instant protesting, explaining, rebutting.

A) Some of the shrewdest and soundest psychology is to be found in the Bible. It is a psychology piercingly true to life.

B) Take the case of Elijah and the sad sequel to the triumph on Mount Carmel. The man who, singlehanded fearlessly confronted the prophets of Baal, rose and ran for his life from the taunts and threats of a woman. And when you track him down to his hiding place in the wilderness, what do you find him saying? Not, "I am a recreant, a coward, a poor apology for a prophet," but "I, even only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

C) The defense mechanism is at work. He is making an alibi do duty for self-blame. You couldn't find a clearer example of what psychologist mean by rationalization. His mind has arrived at a compromise which will give it a measure of peace. He is not deliberately manufacturing an excuse to save his feelings. You can't charge him with conscious hypocrisy. He is evading the facts, but he is unconscious of evading them. This is what makes rationalization so mischievous. Elijah is emphasizing a fact - his solitariness in Israel which, while it is true as far as it goes, is irrelevant. It is obscuring the true fact, that he has shirked his duty, deserted his post, been frightened out of his wits by Jezebel. *We too, are frightened by the Jezebel in our lives.*

D) We all make alibis do duty for self-blame. When we make a mistake, it is a slip; when somebody else makes it, it is a blunder. What in us is righteous indignation in another is bad temper. What for us is a clever stroke of business in a fellow competitor is unethical behavior. A man tells himself that he is merely indulging in a harmless flirtation or a woman that romance and love have at last come into her life. They are rationalizing, dressing up reprehensible conduct in an idealistic light, turning a blind eye on an indefensible ^{or} action, persuading themselves that they are actuated by worthy motives.

II. Another defense mechanism of the mind psychologists call projection.

A) After David had done a very contemptible thing ^{that he} in the matter of the wife of Uriah, the Hittite - not only taken Bathsheba from Uriah but put him in the front line of battle so that he was killed - the prophet Nathan came and told him the story of the rich man with many flocks and herds who took the poor man's one ewe lamb. David was passionately indignant with the rich man, ~~condemned~~ ^{condemned} him to death there and then. It never occurred to him, until Nathan courageously declared, "Thou art the man," that the story was an exact picture of his own conduct. He had repressed the memory of it and the guilt of it - memory and guilt alike had sunk into his unconscious where they were not dead and buried but festering and ulcerating - and he gained a measure of relief, as we all do, by projection, being angry with his own fault when he saw it in someone else.

B) What is behind all this defense mechanism, this building of alibis? Ugly facts we will ~~acknowledge~~ ^{repress} and of which we may not even be conscious. Cowardice in the case of Elijah. ~~Adultery~~ and murder in the case of David. People repress into their unconscious, desires, impulses, feelings which they refuse to acknowledge because the acknowledgment would be distasteful and a blow to their self-esteem.

C) Why are ugly facts kept out of our consciousness? Because we need to stand well in our own eyes. We can't afford to forfeit self-respect: when that goes practically everything goes. Contempt from those about us is hard to bear, but God pity the wretch who has contempt for himself.

D) People will go to any length to preserve a certain kind of self-respect - projection, fantasy, compensation, rationalization, repression, one defense mechanism after another. And all because we cannot endure to be put in the wrong. We have to find some way of assuring ourselves that we are all right, some way of holding our heads up, facing the world, keeping on the job. We must be at rights with ourselves, even if it means making wrong seem right.

III. To make wrong seem right, to ignore, repress, forget it is not to dispose of it. Down it goes into the unconscious, and what mischief it works there, festering, suppurating, ulcerating. For the unconscious is not a storehouse but a mill.