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Digital Edition 09/01/2001
By Holiness Data Ministry

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Jack's Concern

By Mrs. Paul E. King

From the October 18, 1981 Sunday School Beacon

"Why the pensive mood?" Mrs. Berryman asked her teenage son as she came up the porch steps and saw Jack's brow furrowed and his face wearing a far-away look.

Untangling his leg from the glider where he had dangled it over the side, Jack stood suddenly to his feet. "It's Mr. Smuthers, Mom."

"What about Mr. Smuthers?"

Following his mother inside the house, Jack said, "He just doesn't like us, that's what. And it bothers me. I've never met anyone like him; not in all of my life. Why doesn't he like us?" the boy asked, gesticulating frantically with his hands. "We've done everything possible to be nice to him."

"That I can't answer," Mrs. Berryman said sadly, washing her hands before sifting flour into a mixing bowl for making pies. "He's just a loner, I guess. There are some people like that."

"But, Mom, it shouldn't be! He's our closest neighbor. It's almost as though he resents our living here."

Cutting shortening into the flour-salt mixture, Mrs. Berryman said matter-of-factly, "I understand the house stood vacant for a long time prior to our move into it. Perhaps he may feel that we are infringing upon his privacy by living so close by. But I'm certainly



thankful for the house. God let us find it, I'm sure. It's not too far from your father's work and the price was minimal considering other houses at which we looked. But back to Mr. Smuthers; we'll just have to pray more earnestly for him and ask the Lord to help us find the key to his heart."

Jack watched his mother as she rolled the flaky crusts and put them in the pans. Then he hurried outside to think. He remembered having read of the preacher whose life had been threatened by the husband of one of his parishioners if he dared set foot in the man's house. "I'll break his neck!" the irate man had threatened angrily, meaning to carry out his threat should the minister call. When the preacher rushed into the house one day, the man was so startled that he did nothing as God's servant stood for a brief time in front of a caged canary which had been singing lustily. "My, but that's a bird any man could be proud of!" was the minister's remark before he made a hasty apology for his bad manners and hurried out again.

Jack remembered reading how that, when the two men met sometime later, the angry man was really quite civil and nice to the minister and, still later, he told his wife to invite her pastor to their home. This became a repeated experience, and the minister kept his conversation geared to secular things until his sixth visit. Now was the time! God's humble servant related his early experiences as a drunkard, fighter and gambler, ending with, "But God saved me from all that and made me a soul winner. And if you will cry to God for mercy and pardon, He will do for you what He did for me." The result was instantaneous. Falling to his knees, the man gave his heart and life to God and eventually became a well-known figure working for the Lord.

"There are times," the writer had stated, "when the four spiritual laws of the most complex theological system will chase the object of witnessing away. Simple honest interest in a person can often love a sinner into the kingdom of God."

Love a sinner into the kingdom of God! The full impact of the words hit Jack in the very center of his heart. That was his key: Love. Love toward the cantankerous, crotchety, unfriendly neighbor. He would need much wisdom, he realized divine wisdom. But it had worked for the minister about whom he had been reading and, since God was not a respecter of persons, he knew it would work for him, too.

He walked across the lawn, praying and thinking. The preacher had rushed into the man's house, taking him by surprise, he mused silently. But he, Jack Berryman, dare not duplicate the act. It would serve only to further antagonize his neighbor. And as to whether the man had a bird upon which he could brag or make favorable comment, Jack didn't know. He had never been inside the house. Truth of the matter was, he had been sternly rebuked for going up on the porch and putting his neighbor's paper in the marl holder after he had retrieved it from a playful puppy who was about to make havoc of The Daily Item and scatter the news to the four winds.

What could he do to reach the man's heart? he wondered, hurrying into the garage to pray. Prayer, he knew, was his strongest and most powerful weapon, and he meant to lay hold of the promises of God and wrestle in prevailing prayer until the mountain of prejudice and malice -- or whatever it was -- was removed. God would give him an opening by which to speak and witness to Mr. Smuthers other than the one used by the wise soul-winner of his recent reading. He was not limited to any one particular thing or way in working out His purposes and fulfilling His plans. He used various means and methods in dealing with individuals: a whale to bring a disobedient Jonah around to making a final commitment and say an undying yes to the will of God, a talking donkey to get the attention of a disobedient prophet and have his eyes opened, and the crowing of the rooster to convict a cowardly Peter.

Praying was easy, and Jack, in a great agony of spirit over his neighbor's lost condition, held on until he was confident that God was paying close attention and that He would soften the man's heart of stone. Feeling like a load was lifted off his heart, he went whistling into the house where his mother's pies, fresh from the oven, were cooling on trivets on the counter top.

"Hungry?" Mrs. Berryman teased, as she saw her son eyeing the still-steaming raspberry and apple pies.

Jack grinned and nodded. "Since praying that load off my heart," he declared emphatically, "I feel starved. But I'll wait till supper when Dad and the rest of the family get home. By the way, did Mr. Krites call? He said he may need me to help put his garage up. It's one of those metal things where everything fits together. He said he'd call me when he was ready to put it up."

"No one called, Jack. But if he told you he'd call, he will. How is his leg? Any better?"

"Stiff. He said the accident left him with a bad leg. But he's still rejoicing in the Lord -- said he could have been killed. That's the beautiful thing about those two old people; they always find something for which to be thankful. It makes no difference what happens to them -- they always praise God for His goodness and thank Him that things were not any worse than they were. That's real Christianity and holiness on display. Quite a contrast to some people we know, Mother."

"And quite an example for all of us to follow, I'd say."

"That is what grieves me so over Mr. Smuthers; I see what he could be, and would be, if he allowed God to have his heart. But he's going to change, Mom. I just got the assurance out in the garage. Yes, Mr. Smuthers is going to be changing. God's going to do it!"

"Faith and hope and trust are wonderful triplets, Jack." Mrs. Berryman said with tears shining in her dark eyes. "Cling to them; never allow one to be separated from the other."

Jack smiled, thinking how like the Scripture verses in Proverbs his mother's statement sounded.

Jack visited the garage each day -- twice a day: in the early morning hours before he left home to help Mr. Krites and again in the evening after supper was over before he showered and went to bed.

It was during one of his evening prayer "vigils" that he was brought rudely and frighteningly out of his prayer closet by the pitiful cry of a dog. That it was coming from Mr. Smuther's fenced-in back yard was all too evident since the sound was close by their own garage.

Jack rushed out into the cool, fresh goodness of the gathering twilight and looked around him. What he saw made him tremble with fear and pity and compassion. Two boys, armed with clubs, were racing madly away from the scene, leaving a bleeding, crying, mangled dog in Mr. Smuther's back yard.

Jack raced after the pair, sure he knew who they were. Momentarily he saw their faces as they turned a corner and he was now positive that they were a part of a gang who were bent on nothing but trouble. Then he turned back to the innocent dog.

Mr. Smuthers was bending over his once-beautiful collie, crying. He was totally oblivious of Jack's presence until Jack said softly, "Shall I call Doctor Jacobs, the vet?"

Like one in a daze, the man replied, "Oh, it's you, Jack. Yes, if you will, do call. Oh, those wicked boys ! How could they do it!"

"I saw who they are, Mr. Smuthers. I'll call the police first. They need to see what's being done to innocent animals, and by the time they've made their report, Doctor Jacobs should be here."

"Go to the house, Jack; Mrs. Smuthers will let you in. You can call from there," the neighbor said, bending over his collie, making soft, crooning sounds in her ear and stroking her head which, by now, was pillowed on his knee.

All the way to the house and back to the yard again Jack prayed fervently. When the police had the names of the two culprits, and after Doctor Jacobs left with Tawny, the collie, loaded gently into a bed in the back of his station wagon, Mr. Smuthers put his hand on Jack's shoulder. "I'd give my life for that dog, I do believe," he stammered between his tears.

"She's been with the wife and me for sixteen years and wouldn't harm a soul. Why did they do it, Jack? Why? How could they? Tawny never bothered them; nor anybody, for that matter. And now, look at her! bruised, bleeding, mangled, and.., and possibly dying."

"Do you believe in miracles?" Jack asked quickly. "Because I do. And the God whose I am and Whom I serve is able to heal Tawny's broken body. But Mr. Smuthers, I know of Someone -- a wonderful Person -- whose body was bruised and broken for you. He left the splendors and glories of Heaven and came to earth where he willingly gave His life for our sins.

"I know, Jack. I know. I once knew Him. I'd still know Him if I had not allowed bitterness to come into my heart over the death of our only child -- my son. Come, sit down," the neighbor invited, motioning Jack to a bench on the lawn.

In the lastly-gathering shades of night, they sat-the elderly man and the teenage boy.

"Mr. Smuthers," Jack began, tears coursing down his cheeks, "I have had such a heavy burden for your soul that I feel like I'll die unless you get saved. I've been praying earnestly for you. We love you and we want to help you."

The man stared into space for a moment. Then he broke out in convulsive sobs. "I... I've been a miserable man, Jack, ever since I forsook God and turned my back on him. And I've been hateful to you and your good father and mother. Hateful and contemptible because I knew you were real Christians, and it reminded me of those wonderful years when I knew Him and loved Him. I was afraid of you folks -- backsliders are like this. But I see that it's impossible to get away from God. Now, if you will, Jack, I'd like you to pray for me . . ."

Feeling like his heart would break unless Mr. Smuthers got saved, and weeping brokenly and unashamedly, Jack fell to his knees. The neighbor did the same. On the thick carpet of lawn, faltering out his first prayer in years, Mr. Smuthers prayed through to victory. A hush enfolded the two -- a beneficent calm like the promise of new hope for the long-lost man. He turned a shining face to the young soul-winner.

"Everything's all right, Jack," he said. "Thanks for your prayers -- I've heard them every night."

Walking home in the moonlight later on, Jack raised his eyes heavenward. "Thanks for using Tawny, Jesus," he said. "And please spare her and heal her."

With full assurance of heart that that prayer would also be answered, he hurried inside, feeling happy and light.

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THE END