

SHOULD

By Rev. Edwin Lynn

“Should” is a fascinating word. It appears to be innocent. It is not even its own word. It is the past tense of the verb “shall”. The word originates in the Gothic word “Skuda”, which means “owed” or “obligated”. The dictionary definition refers to fulfillment of an obligation, duty or necessity. The word is related to “would”, “ought”, and “must”. Other definitions include “anticipation” or “expectation”, ie. “They should arrive by noon.” As a condition: “If they should stop, then so would I.” And as uncertainty: “Will they come? I should think they would.”

We know words like “depressed” and “angry” are important, but a little word like “should” sneaks up on us. It can be so incidental: “I should brush my teeth.” So innocuous: “What pants should I wear?” Or so vague and grandiose: “I should be a better person.” “Should” is here to stay. It is the classic expression of what is called in transactional analysis the parent voice, “You should” and “You shouldn’t.” It is an important part of many instructions. “Should” is also related to what Freud called the Superego. It is an expression of conscience.

We need to be more aware of the dangers of this word. It is been my experience that many people who use “Should” continually in their vocabulary (of course these people are not in this church) often have a great deal of unrest within themselves. It is not the word in itself, but its use which is a reflection of an attitude.

DIFFICULTIES

There are three major difficulties in the use of the word. It can affect our social view, our attitudes towards other people and toward ourselves. All of these are inter-related.

Seeing the world with a “should” attitude has many dangers. I think of a woman in her early fifties who I met. She was from a small town, Catholic, and very rigid about her attitudes. She complained about everything. “There shouldn’t be such high taxes, corruption, drugs, fighting violence, fires, deaths, and accidents.” We can all agree that none of the elements are desirable, but they do exist. She could not deal with their existence and responded by drinking to relieve her conflicts. She could have responded in other ways. She could have worked for justice or reducing taxes or fighting corruption, but she didn’t. The use of “should” is not her problem, but it did reflect her attitude. Another word would have been more accurate and reflected her healthier attitude. Such a word is “bad”. We know that there is not only good in the world, but there is bad as well. To assume only the good is to create an aberration of reality. As Karen Horney said, “People in its grip (“should”) re not striving toward a greater degree of honesty, but are driven to absolute honesty which is always just around the corner.” The point is that “should” can be a proper expression of conscience, with our response to do what we can to alleviate problems; however, used repetitively and unthinkingly, it becomes a rigid trap creating an unrealistic viewpoint.

A second danger is looking at people as if they “should” be a certain way.

The “shoulds” always produce a feeling of strain, which is the greater the more a person tries to actualize his “should” in his behavior...Furthermore, because of externalizations, the “should” always contribute to disturbance in human relations in one way or another.

A more appropriate word would be “prefer”. We can prefer to have things a certain way or desire particular types of conduct, but we still accept what is. “Prefer” is more flexible, less rigid than “Should”. People can be trapped with their “Should” behaviors with others. The therapist tells of a woman, thirty-four years old, who was raised with the belief that one should not have sex before marriage. This imperative was dominating her relationships. She was afraid of getting too close to men as it was driving them away from her. The imperative was no longer operative or helpful at her current age and relations with the opposite sex.

Wayne Dyer, in his book, “Your Erroneous Zone”, describes the difficulty

“The only way out of this trap is to stop thinking in those erroneous right vs. wrong ways. As I explained to Clifford, who was in a marriage in which he argued every day about every conceivable topic, ‘Instead of attempting to convince your wife how wrong she is, why not simply have discussion in which you have no “should”-expectations for her. As long as she is allowed to be different from you, you’ll eliminate the incessant arguing in which you doggedly, albeit frustratedly, pursue being right.’ Clifford was able to set aside this neurotic need, and also to put some communication and love back into his marriage. All rights and wrongs of every description represent “should” of one kind or another. And the “should” get in your way, particularly when they conflict with another person’s need to have his own as well.”

David Burns, a psychiatrist at the University of Pennsylvania and author of the book “Feeling Good”, writes:

---“Should” statements generate a lot of unnecessary emotional turmoil in your daily life. When the reality of your own behavior falls short of your standards, your “should” and “shouldn’ts” create self-loathing, shame and guilt. When the all-too-human performance of other people falls short of your expectations, as will inevitably happen from time to time, you’ll feel bitter and self-righteous. You’ll either have to change your expectations to approximate reality or always feel let down by human behavior.”

The most devastating “should” of all is the one we carry around inside our heads. I know a man in his mid-fifties, who constantly berates himself that he “should be this” or “should have done that.” It is so obvious to others that these “should” that he lives with are destructive to his own well-being, yet he genuinely believes that he should have done things differently. They sound absurd when we read them, yet, that list of should is part of each of us. Karen Horney writes a list of “should” a man might carry around with him. Of course, the list applies to both men and women. As you read the list, think of the items on your own “Should” list.

"I should be the utmost of honesty, generosity, considerateness, justice, dignity, courage, unselfishness. I should be the perfect lover, husband, wife, teacher. I should be able to endure everything, should like everybody, should love my husband's/wife's parents, my country; or I should not be attached to anything or anybody, nothing should matter to me, I should never feel hurt, and I should always be serene and unruffled. I should always enjoy life; or I should be above pleasure and enjoyment. I should know, understand, and foresee everything. I should be able to solve every problem of my own, or of others, in no time. I should be able to overcome every difficulty as soon as I see it. I should never be tired or fall ill. I should be able to do things in one hour which can only be done in two to three hours."

We have probably all felt some of these "should". As an example, I should draw and write more. We, I, need another word to indicate these desires. As an example, I can "like" to draw more or write more. We can "like" to be rather than "should" be more honest, generous, considerate.

David Burns tells of another irony of using the word "should":

"The major thing that holds you back when you're trying to change a bad habit like eating, smoking, or drinking too much is your belief you are out of control. The cause of this lack of control is those "should" statements. They defeat you. Suppose, for example, you are trying to avoid eating ice cream. There you are watching TV saying, "Oh, I really should study and I shouldn't eat ice cream." Now ask yourself, "How do I feel when I say these things to myself?" I think you know the answer: You feel guilty and nervous. Then what do you do? You go and eat! That is the point. The reason you're eating is that you're telling yourself you shouldn't! Then you try to bury your guilt and anxiety under piles of food."

One technique for overcoming these inner "should" is getting them outside of ourselves. We need to say aloud to someone else or to a tape recorder, or to ourselves. In most cases, when they emerge from that inner world, we see how silly they sound. There is something about bringing them into the outer reality that demonstrates their inner foolishness.

SUGGESTIONS

What can we do to be more realistic in the use of "should" and the attitude it represents? I would like to make three suggestions. First, we need to look at the source of our "should", our rules, and our view of things as well as the habit of speech which enforces these attitudes. Who says that this is the way, or people, or I should be? Where did those should come from? Where did we get the idea that the world should only be good? Or that people should only act in a certain way and we should be a certain type of person? Did these attitudes come from our parents, family, teachers, observations, spouse, fellow-workers, mentors, or heroes? Do these ideas make sense? Does it test the reality in our lives?

The church can be a source of "should" for many people. It has a long tradition in this regard. One of the successes of our church is that we are not following a number of rigid "should" related to religion. Some might feel that church should have pews or have an organ. We know they are not necessary. Church can be a place teaching values, even some "should" perhaps, but they need to be reality-

oriented. They need to be flexible, able to change with conditions. In other words, we want to encourage people to think, rather than follow blindly.

Secondly, what is the motivation of our “should” behavior? Psychiatrist, Albert Ellis, uses the term “musterbation”. He says we are using this term, “Whenever you find yourself behaving in ways that you feel you must even though you might prefer some other form of behavior.” We may be using “should” behavior to get approval, such as when you were a child, being a good girl or boy. This can be regressive and lead to a self-righteous attitude that “I’m good because I do.” Other are bad because they don’t. The use of “should” can also be a way of avoiding responsibility. If we follow the “should” rigidly, we do not need to make decisions or take risks. But there is also no expansion of possibilities. If we do things the way we have been told to do them, we don’t have to think about whether it is the best way, and, conversely, the use of “should” can be a way of manipulating others. “This is the way it has to be,” which often expressed insecurity and an appeal to authority to intimidate others.

Lastly, we need to come to terms with our limits. We need to accept ourselves. Our mind thinks that we can do or be everything, but that is impossible. There are many things we can do, but not everything at once. David Burns shows the paradoxical nature of trying to do everything. As you read his example you might think of some decision you have made where you have continually thought that you should have done something differently.

“As you review the financial section of the paper, you tell yourself, ‘I shouldn’t have bought that stock. It’s gone down two points.’ As a way out of this trap, ask yourself, ‘Now, at the time I bought the stock, did I know it was going to go down in value?’ I suspect you’ll say ‘no’. Now ask, ‘If I’d known it was going down, would I have bought it?’ Again, you’ll answer ‘no’. So, what you’re really saying is that if you’d known this at the time, you’d have acted differently. To do this, you would have to be able to predict the future with absolute certainty. Can you predict the future with absolute certainty? Again, your answer must be ‘no’. You have two options: You can either decide to accept yourselves as an imperfect human being with limited knowledge and realize as an imperfect human being with limited knowledge and realize that you will at times make mistakes, or you can hate yourself for it.”

We need to accept our decisions, learning from them, but not regretting them. In the same way, we can’t be everybody; we can only be ourselves, doing what we do best.

SUMMARY

We need to be aware of the word “should”. We will use it. We should use it. In the Lynn family, we have had fun with the word by over-emphasizing it, using such lines as “you should be aware of ‘should’.” Or instead of a simple, “Let’s go downstairs,” we say “We should go downstairs.” In its exaggerated form we become more aware of the word. We also need to be aware of how much we use the word. We may be using it just right. We may not use it enough. Most typically, we are probably using it more frequently, more unconsciously, and more rigidly emphatic than we realize. In addition to the spoken “should”, there is also that persistent internal “should”, that demanding and unrealistic viper who tells us no matter what we do or have done, something else should have been one, or done better.

“Should is a seemingly innocent word signifying the past tense of the verb “shall”. It is a word which can sneak into a vocabulary and begin to be a destructive force. It is a word which has many valid uses signifying intention, obligation, indignation, but it is an inherently dangerous word full of unrealistic, rigid, self-righteous meanings.

The world has many difficulties, many bad situations, but these problems are real and will not go away with wishful “shoulds.”

People have many and varied behaviors, behaviors we often prefer were different, but these patterns are individual and will not go away with scolding “shoulds.”

We have grand and idealistic fantasies of ourselves, qualities we would like to be different, but these inner constructs are unrelated to outer realities and will not materialize with demanding “shoulds.”

We need to look at ourselves with particular attention to the sources and motivation of our “shoulds”. We need to know the limits of our “should” so we can accept our decision and ourselves. We should be aware “should”, using the word realistically and with flexibility.