

# Eugenics: A Sermon for Mother's Day

Harry H. Mayer  
3512 Kenwood Avenue,  
Kansas City, Missouri

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What is the purpose of Mother's Day which we are celebrating in our service this morning? Why is this day set apart in remembrance of our mothers? Why are the people of our country kneeling at the shrine of American Motherhood and paying tribute to all the mothers of man? Why do we recite poems in loving praise of mother, preach sermons in honor of her, give pageants and sing songs exalting her?

There is a sentence in Scriptures that expresses tersely and eloquently exactly what is signified by our celebration of the day. In a phrase that is often quoted but not always fully appreciated the Book of Proverbs (chapter 17, verse 6 b) says, in words which according to the spirit, and I am inclined to think also the letter, of the original text may be rendered "The glory of children are their parents," or "ancestors".

It is a truism in this day and age that the good reputation, the good character, and the worthy achievements of our parents reflect credit upon us and that our own good reputation, good character and worthily gained achievements reflect credit upon our parents. To remind ourselves of this is but a form. But there is urgent need to remind ourselves and have those best qualified to speak on the subject remind us in discussions in the pulpit and the press how deeply it concerns the future of the whole human race that every child be born into the world descended from a family stock that is healthy and vigorous both in body and in mind.

Every child is the heir of the strength or the weakness of the family tree of which it is a sprout. The capacity to develop into a genius or the incapacity to be anything but a moron is inherited from our forbears. Our parents may safeguard our material future by bequest of money or lands; they may prepare us for usefulness to society by training us according to our best ability or hire others to train us in schools according to their best ability or hire others to train us in schools according to the best known theories of education, but nothing that a father or mother can do for us in the way of education, in the way of endowment of wealth is comparable to the gift that a parent bestows on a child in handing over to it a good ancestry. Our pedigree is not merely an ornament that is hung like a necklace about our throats, it is something that is burned into our bone and sinew and stamped upon the roots of our being, blood of our blood, flesh of our flesh, soul of our soul. We combine in ourselves in diverse proportions the aptitudes, the proclivities, the temperament, the physical "stigmata" of all our ancestors.

The characteristics that a parent transmits to the child are so evidently subject to definite, unchanging laws that a special science has come into existence to map out more clearly how valuable traits of character and talents and physical attributes may best be transmitted through heredity from one generation of man to the next. This new science of heredity, called eugenics, is being assiduously cultivated by eminent leaders of modern thought such as Havelock Ellis and Dean Inge in England and equally eminent followers of Francis Galton in all parts of the world. The aims of eugenics are fundamentally scientific and its primary assumptions are scientifically sound. It should

not be judged by the false prophets who are crowding to the front to take its name in vain. Its specific task is to determine with the utmost possible accuracy the actual and potential place of human heredity in the entire equation of civilization. It stimulates faith in the infinite worth of man and his power of unending growth. It joins with sociology and religion in teaching that the unit of the social organism is the family and that upon the maintenance of a high standard of family life depend the security, the progress, and the happiness of civilized society. It supports religion in lifting motherhood and fatherhood from the level of a function shared with the brutes to the lofty plane of conscious, intelligent, forward-looking partnership with God in the work of creation. It has no connection whatever with any movement that would eliminate God as the Source, the Center and the Secret of all the teeming life of the universe.

Eugenics recognizes the influence of the other factors besides heredity in the formation of character, it assumes that the relative importance of each of them will eventually be roughly ascertained by scientific investigation. The product of these factors it subsumes under the name of acquired characteristics to distinguish them from those which are inborn.

The child inherits the customs, the knowledge, the traditions, the ideas, the whole culture of the parent group as well as the physical and mental qualities of the parents themselves. The influence of the environment and example upon the individual should not be underrated. Their effects are wonderfully far-reaching. The effect of the right word spoken at the right time by the father, mother, friend or teacher may continue for many years, or even life, and many a middle aged or older person has confessed that in a critical juncture, some word, some admonition, some precept, some act remembered from youth has risen in the mind to be a guiding star to illumine the dark places of a perplexing problem and amid confusion and doubt has shown the person the right road to take at the cross-roads of an important decision in life, for weal or for woe. But the forces that beat in upon us from our environment affect us less - how much less would be difficult to say - than those of our physical heredity. Evil propensities may be curbed, weakness controlled and strength cultivated but the innate qualities of the stock apparently remain the same as they were - unaltered and unalterable.

How vital it is therefore that when a couple mate they should remember the eugenic factors underlying matrimony. However superior one of them may be, if the other is not an equal, physically, mentally and morally, the offspring will be likely to be inferior.

It is generally understood that intellectual and temperamental compatibility should be well considered in choosing a mate. It is also generally understood that financial advantages should not, but often do, play a leading part in the formation of matrimonial alliances. But society contrary to its own better knowledge has a casual way of dismissing as of slight significance the tremendously important question of family history and the persistence of hereditary family traits. With due regard for all that is involved it would seem to be desirable that when a man and maid plight their troth their vows of love should have not only the blessings of religion and the protection of the law but also the sanction of the scientifically proved principles of eugenics.

We cannot dodge the issue. We have been too complacent, too sure that everything will turn out all right in the end. Some it does - but sometimes it does not.

The union of two bad lines of descent tend to produce inferior offspring. The union of a defective stock with one not defective or even marriages where both are of defective

stocks will not produce in every case a defective offspring but any quality lacking in both parents we may be sure will be lacking in all of the children.

Although the science of eugenics began only recently with Francis Galton, who defines it as the science dealing with “the influences that improve the inborn traits of the race”, some of the elementary fundamental principles of this science were empirically arrived at long before his time. The Japanese have a proverb that as water flows upward so the son must be like the father. A proverb current among the people of the Georgian Republic is to the effect that if the spirit of the father does not appear in the child one may swear to that of the grandfather in the grandchild. It is not necessary to know about chromosomes and mesoplasms in order to understand heredity and the practical application of its principles. One who has never made a study of the matter may know that it is highly important that when a man and a woman mate they should look to character, to the family history and the family vigor in order that there may be no deterioration in their offspring. The science of eugenics sounds like something very abstract, very recondite, very profound, but it is a simple thing as all great truths, and it is a science only because the things that have been found out by experiment are analyzed and classified and new unknown principles built up upon the foundations of the older principles that have been discovered.

It is said of a young crab that it found fault with its mother because the mother had criticized it for walking backwards and urged it to try to walk forwards. “Why do you not teach me how to walk forwards if you wish that I should walk forward” said the young crab. “I cannot teach you because I know not how” said the mother. It is the characteristic of the crab to walk backwards, instead of forwards. A mother crab may exhort her child until doomsday to walk forwards but the child cannot do it because it is a crab. The human mother and father of inferior nature, of coarse character, of vulgarity of mind and spirit may turn their child over to the best schools, to be educated, but the child will remain handicapped all its life long, in spite of all its teachers can do for it.

In ancient Oriental literature there is a parable it may be well for us to remember on this Mother’s Day. The parable, which you have doubtless heard many times, is so apropos that I venture to remind you again of it. You will recall that a traveler in the desert became weary and hungry and thirsty, almost to the point of exhaustion. He at last reached a fig tree and sat down beneath its shade and rested, and when he had refreshed himself and rested, he ate of the figs of the tree, and his thirst and his hunger were allayed. After a while he felt strong enough to continue his journey, but as he left he wished to bless the fig tree that had blessed him so richly. He said “Oh Fig Tree with what blessing can I bless thee; thou are blessed with much fruit, luscious and grateful to the palate; thou are blessed with thick foliage; thou are blessed by having a limpid spring gushing from near thy roots - What blessing can I ask God to give you?” “None, Oh Fig Tree, except that I may pray to God that thy offspring may be goodly like unto thee”. That prayer should be the prayer of every father and every mother in his or her heart of hearts: “May my offspring be goodly like unto myself; may I do my share to perpetuate and improve the good qualities of my sires.”

May we do nothing to permit our blood to be adulterated by infusion of blood of inferior grade.

“The crown of the old man are children’s children and the glory of children are their fathers”.