

THE MAKING OF THE RIGHT KIND OF A LIFE¹

IN the thirteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles may be found the text for our morning's message:

"David served his own generation by the will of God."

From this text is deduced the simple but vital theme: **THE MAKING OF THE RIGHT KIND OF A LIFE.**

The supreme vocation is the vocation of right living. The first question and the big question for every life is, not how to make a living, but how to make a life. Making a living is a mere incident, making a life is our business, in this world. The supreme contribution that any human being can offer to the world is to offer it the right kind of a life. One Savonarola can turn the tides of Florence. One Aristides, the just man, can perceptibly lift Athens higher. Ten righteous men would have saved Sodom. The people of Constantinople said of John Chrysostom, the golden-mouthed: "It were better for the sun to cease his shining than for John Chrysostom to cease his preaching."

In the making of a life, certain principles must be observed, and they are indicated in the text. The text itself would be a noble motto for each member of this graduating class: "David served his own generation by the will of God." "I will serve mine own generation by the will of God." There are three principles indicated in the text, and these three are necessary in the making of the right kind of a

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274 The Making of the Right Kind of a Life

life. First, the true business of life is service. That is the test of life. "David served." Service is the Great Master's test of life. "By their fruits ye shall know them." The divine emphasis is always on deeds. The most beautiful portrait ever drawn of the ideal life is in five little words: "He went about doing good." And we are called to "be imitators of Him, as beloved children." Gladstone, the imperial statesman of his time, never wearied of saying: "One example is worth a thousand arguments." What the world needs is service. Its wounds cannot be stanchd except by service. Its ignorance cannot be dispelled except by service. Its weakness cannot be met with proper reinforcement except by service. The true test of life is service.

Only by such test can faith be vindicated. "Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Faith is more than a dogma. Faith is a passion. Faith lifts. Faith achieves. Faith arrives. Great believers have always been great doers. Witness Moses and Paul and Luther and Livingstone and Grenfell and Clara Barton and Frances Willard and all the rest. Garibaldi was thrown into an Italian prison, but he managed to scribble on a little piece of paper, and get it back to his men, this message: "If fifty Garibaldi's be thrown into prison, let Rome be free." Great believers are always great doers. The heroic chapters of human history are the chapters of men and women who have climbed from faith to strength on the stairway of service.

The teaching of the Great Master of men is utterly revolutionary as to all the supreme things. Jesus never gave a little answer to a big question. For example, one asked Him one day: "Master, who is my neighbor?" and He gave an answer to that question that opens up vistas of meaning and responsibility that continue to surprise and challenge

The Making of the Right Kind of a Life 275

mankind the world around. Jesus utterly revolutionized the ordinary conceptions men have of greatness.

Once men thought that the chief greatness was the greatness of brawn. Their conception of God was that He was something of a muscular giant. Their doctrine was that might makes right, and it would seem that a good many have not discarded that doctrine yet. Certainly, there is to be no disparagement of brawn. There is no glory in one's having a weak body. There is no virtue in frail health. And yet brawn is not the chief greatness.

Then there came a time when men thought that the chief greatness was the greatness of brain. They conceived of God as a great intellectual giant. Certainly brain is nowhere to be disparaged. Knowledge always has been power, and always will be. The sure foundations of states have always been laid, not in ignorance, but in knowledge. And yet, brain is not the chief greatness.

When the Master came among men He brushed aside their preconceived notions of greatness and said: "The acme of greatness, the highest greatness, is the greatness of service. If any man among you aspire to be the greatest man of all, the chief over all, let him be the servant of all." And slowly but surely the world is coming to the recognition of that doctrine of the Master concerning greatness. It is greatness through the right kind of service.

The chiefest exponent the Master has had, the highest product that Christianity has produced, the greatest single credential that the Gospel has thus far set forth, namely, the Apostle Paul, stated the true life principle for himself and for us when he said: "I am debtor to all men, to the Jews and to the Greeks, to the wise and to the unwise, to the strong and to the weak. I am debtor inasmuch as in me is possible to every human being."

276 The Making of the Right Kind of a Life

What shall we do about this debt? One of three things. How shall we pay the debt? In one of three ways. Life is always invested in one of three ways. We can play the miser with life, and you will remember, my fellow-students, that education can be just as miserly and just as selfish as gold can be. The life of the miser may be lived by any of us. There died awhile ago, in one of the larger cities, a man who was supposed to be a pauper. For years he lived alone in his little hut of squalor and wretchedness. Kindly women came, venturing now and then to leave him food, lest he should go hungry. By and by, the little cabin was strangely still for a day or two, and an investigation was made, and it was found that the old man had passed into the Silent Land. A careful investigation was made of the cottage, and they found something over four million dollars of gold and bank stocks and the like, hidden away there in that little hut of squalor and poverty. Of what value, I ask you, is such a life as that? Miserable indeed is the life of the miser.

Life may be invested in just an opposite direction. It may take the course of the spendthrift. All its power may be dragged down and debauched and prostituted. It may be recklessly flung away. The picture was recently given us in the daily press, of a young man in a large city who summoned about him a group of his comrades for an evening dinner, reminding them that when the dinner was over he expected to give them a thrill, such as they would not soon forget. A band of music entertained the gay party; and when the dinner was over he summoned the young men to follow him, preceded by his band of music, and they came to a swinging bridge across a swift-flowing stream, and then, standing on this swinging bridge, he called to them, saying, "The chief thrill is coming just now," and with a wild shriek

The Making of the Right Kind of a Life 277

he flung himself into the gurgling waters and was a suicide right before their eyes. A man can take seventy years to fling his life away, or he can do it in one hour. Life prostituted and debauched for selfish ends inexorably misses the great purpose of its Divine Creator. Pitiably beyond words is the life of the spendthrift, the prodigal.

The true conception of life is that it is a trusteeship. All power, no matter what it is, is under inescapable obligation to serve humanity. Financial power, social power, governmental power, political power, intellectual power, all power is under bonds to serve humanity. He who forgets that fact defeats the end of his being and vitiates the high plan that the Divine Maker has for human life. The poet voiced it for us in his simple poem when he said:

“I live for those who love me,
For those who believe me true,
For the heaven that smiles above me
And awaits my spirit, too.
For the cause that lacks assistance,
For the wrongs that need resistance,
For the bright hopes in the distance,
And the good that I can do.”

The true test of life is service. I pray you to believe it in your deepest hearts.

Our text indicates another principle that must be regarded in the building of the right kind of a life. “David served his own generation”—mark well the words—“his own generation.” Some men spend much of their time sighing over what they have lost in the past. Other men sentimentally dream about the wonderful things they are going to do in the future. And between sighing over the past, which has gone forever, and sentimentally dreaming over the future,

278 The Making of the Right Kind of a Life

which has not come and which is unknown, time gets away; and the vital, responsible present, the only time that is ours, passes, and its opportunities are returnless forever. "David served his own generation." If you, my fellow-students, desire to make life that high and worthy thing that the Great Creator designs that it shall be, then I summon you to-day to lay to heart the truth that your service is to begin to-day, in the most active and worthy fashion; and the living present is worthily to be magnified by you, because to-day is the only day that is yours.

What is your sphere of service? Look about you, and if your eyes and ears are alert, you will be easily able to find your sphere. Begin with your own circle. Look at the standards and habits that obtain in your own circle. Look at the conditions that are there regnant. Should those conditions be changed? Should those habits be modified? Should those standards be different? Begin with your own circle, and every man in his own circle will have his hands full, if he would live the great and worthy life. And as you faithfully live in your own circle, meeting worthily there each duty as it comes, that circle will widen and widen and widen, and your days shall be filled with deeds of unselfish and helpful service to a waiting and needy world.

Voices clamant for helpers are all about us. Look at the ignorance that on every hand needs to be dispelled. Carlyle was right when he said: "I count this a tragedy, that any human being should live and die, capable of being taught, without that privilege and without that blessing." Listen to the world-wide call of justice. Listen to the cry that wrong provokes in every quarter. Our sphere of service is all about us. There are the poor to be helped. There are the weak to be defended. There are causes strengthful and worthy all about us crying for champions. There are

bad laws to be rectified. Nothing can be politically right which is morally wrong. The enthronement of a law which defends immorality is a standing anachronism in our modern civilization. Every man should set himself to the rectification of every evil law that may be found, everywhere. And on and on, the circle of influence will widen and the call for service deepen as you give yourselves to the tasks of your day and generation. That Golden Rule of the Great Master, which must be the law of life, we are to seek to have enthroned everywhere. A law for nations it is to be, as well as a law for individuals. Oh, if such Golden Rule had been enthroned in the nations, we would not on this fair morning have the appalling spectacle of mighty nations battle-scarred and war-torn, the news of which daily conflicts plunges the world into its Garden of Gethsemane. And yet, what shall I say, in a passing word, about the world conflict into which our own fair land has been drawn? I must say this: That our land has been compelled, under high moral compulsion, to enter the world conflict. We enter it not with any lust for revenge or for gain. We enter it, I believe, as touching our motives, with clean hands and pure hearts! God help us! We enter it because some things are worth dying for, and human life is a very cheap and tawdry affair if some things are disregarded and despised. The sanctity of woman is worth dying for, and the safety of childhood, and the integrity of the State, and the majesty of righteousness, and the honor and freedom of the United States of America—any and all of these are worth dying for. With conscience and courage, let the whole nation respond to the call of her nobly capable President and the National Congress and go forth in this world crisis in a battle for the rights and safety of humanity, a battle which, in its final issue, shall, please God, move the nations forward

280 The Making of the Right Kind of a Life

and upward, as they have not thus been summoned before, since the stars sang together in creation's morning.

In "your own generation" is your service to be performed. Without turning to the right or to the left, each one is to face faithfully his own sphere, his own circle, his own task, his own high demand, and give himself, without stint or reserve, to carrying out his duty there till the day is done. Quaint old Ben Franklin said: "Value time, for time is the stuff of which life is made." Over the gateway of many a man, his failure might be found written in just two words: "He dawdled."

"If thou canst plan a noble deed,
And never flag till it succeed,
Though in the strife thy heart must bleed;
Whatever obstacles control,
Thine hour will come. Go on, true soul.
Thou'lt win the prize, thou'lt reach the goal."

But, my fellow-students, in the making of a worthy life there is another supreme matter that must have the most conscientious attention at your hands, and that matter is the controlling motive for your life. That keen-minded woman, George Eliot, said: "What makes life dreary is the want of motive." Her saying points a great truth, but it may be amended: "What makes life dreary is the want of the right kind of a motive." Many lives are paltry and sordid and go groveling to the dust and the grave because they are not swayed by the right kind of motive.

One of three motives dominates life. I begin with the lowest. There is, first of all, egoism. It begins and ends with self. Everybody begins with that motive. The little child, learning to talk and to walk, puts out its hands and its voice, claiming everything within its grasp. It has no regard

The Making of the Right Kind of a Life 281

for the owner of this or that. It simply wishes it, claims it, and takes it. Alas, that human life should have men and women in it, grown and in life's middle time, and even with the gray about their temples, whose conception of life is that it begins and ends with self! All self-centered lives are doomed and defeated. History will not allow us to forget that the self-centered life, no matter whose or where, must be doomed and defeated. One of the old Hebrew prophets recites the downfall of his nation in one sharp sentence: "Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself." Let any nation bring forth fruit simply unto herself, and she is inevitably doomed and defeated. Well may this nation sing Kipling's "Recessional," and sing it without ceasing:

"God of our fathers, known of old,
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,
Beneath whose awful Hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine—
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

"The tumult and the shouting dies;
The captains and the kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

"Far-called, our navies melt away;
On dune and headland sinks the fire:
Lo, all our pomp of yesterday
Is one with Nineveh and Tyre!
Judge of the Nations, spare us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

282 The Making of the Right Kind of a Life

“If, drunk with sight of power, we loose
Wild tongues that have not Thee in awe,
Such boastings as the Gentiles use,
Or lesser breeds without the Law—
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!”

The nation that forgets the high purposes of a nation is doomed. The nation whose creed is the creed of the jungle is doomed. And therefore, for my part, I have no real fear about the final outcome of the world struggle that now entralls the nations.

The self-centered organization is doomed. The self-centered college is doomed. The self-centered church is doomed. The self-centered family is doomed. I believe Gladstone was right when he said: “Napoleon had the keenest brain that was ever packed into a human skull.” And yet he died like a dog in the ditch, died after he had convulsed Europe, and made the nations cower before him,—died ignominiously because life began and ended with self. What cared he to walk with ruthless heel over the heart of his beautiful Josephine? What cared he for the sacrifice of a hundred thousand brave men on the field of battle, if only he could carry out his fiendish ambition? Selfishness is the distemper of life. Selfishness is the suicide of all greatness. Selfishness is ever marked for downfall and defeat.

There is another motive, a motive incomparably higher than this first, a motive which has in it very much of praise and worthiness. That is the motive of altruism. Out of that motive have come many of the world’s chiefest and highest blessings. Out of that motive—the altruistic motive—to a remarkable degree, have come our liberties and our institutions. And yet the altruistic motive, my fellow-

The Making of the Right Kind of a Life 283

students, is not high enough yet. Human nature is so forgetful and ungrateful and disappointing. Look at Moses, the first man of the long centuries of the Old Testament days, a man who was and is in himself a university for the world, a man who made the chiefest renunciation that has been made in human history to be the friend and follower of God. He turned away from a throne, with all its splendor and honor and aggrandizement, and linked his life with a down-trodden and spiritless nation of slaves, that he might recover this nation and lead it forth to its high task as a nation. And yet the nation was all along forgetful and ungrateful toward this incomparable leader. "As for this fellow Moses, we wot not what has become of him,"—thus contemptuously they spoke of him when he was out of their sight. The altruistic motive is not sufficiently commanding for the highest battles of life. "Moses endured, as seeing Him who is invisible."

What is the motive sufficiently worthy and commanding for human life? Here it is in our text: "David served his own generation by the will of God."

"He always wins who sides with God.

To him no cause is lost."

And be you well assured, my fellow-students, that he whose life purpose crosses God's purpose for him, invokes defeat for his work and destruction for his influence.

In Chicago a little while ago, where I was speaking for some days to groups of students, many were the incidents told me concerning the burning of that Iroquois Theater building, sometime in the past, with such appalling destruction of life. But the most stirring of all the incidents for my own heart was this: A young student, William McLaughlin, had just come to his hour of graduation, at the

284 The Making of the Right Kind of a Life

age of twenty-one. He was the nephew of a nobly gifted minister of Chicago. The young student waited on his uncle, and received his uncle's felicitations and counsels, in that rosy morning hour for the young man. The great minister said to him: "My son, life is not worth while if a man lives it out of harmony with his Great Saviour and King; but life, my son, is glorious, anywhere, everywhere, if only a man stands faithfully at the post where Divine Providence puts him, till the day is done." Then the minister said: "My son, I shall speak about that Sunday morning, when I come to speak to the people again, taking this for my text: 'For this cause came I unto this hour.'"

You recall the circumstances under which Jesus uttered such words. The Master of men was facing Golgotha and the cross, and He shrank back as He faced those gathering sorrows and clouds, and cried out: "Father, save me from this hour!" Then He rallied, saying: "But for this cause came I unto this hour. Father, glorify Thy name." That is to say: "Thy program shall be carried out. Thy will shall be accomplished. My task is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish His work."

"I shall speak on that," said the great minister, "Sunday morning." With burning heart the young man turned away from his uncle's study, pondering the great things that the uncle had said to him. Down the street he went, when presently he was confronted with a building wrapped in fire, and he heard the shoutings of men and women and children, and saw the men as, selfish and heedless, they were seeking to make their escape from the building, leaving the children and women unprotected. Somehow the heart of the young man carried him into that building, to see if haply he might rescue the helpless and weak. He began his work of rescue, and many did he rescue. Presently his clothing was aflame,

The Making of the Right Kind of a Life 285

but he flung it away. Presently he fell fainting under his last load. When he came to consciousness he was in the hospital, and bending over him were his uncle and aunt. His lips moved and his eyes betokened consciousness, and as they bent low to catch his words they heard him saying over and over again: "But for this cause came I unto this hour." They waited a few hours more, and he was conscious again, and his lips parted again, and they bent low to catch his final sentence: "Father, glorify Thy name. I have finished the work Thou gavest me to do."

Fellow-students, I had rather die at the age of twenty-one, carrying out some high purpose of life like that, than to live, like Methuselah, to be nine hundred and sixty-nine years, and live selfishly from the beginning to the end. Ponder the message of a modern poet :

"I had walked life's way with an easy tread,
Had followed where comforts and pleasures led,
Until one day, in a quiet place,
The Master and I met face to face.

"With station and rank and wealth for my goal,
Much thought for my body, but none for my soul,
I had entered to win in life's big race,
When I met the Master face to face.

"I had built my castles and reared them high,
With their towers had pierced the blue of the sky.
I had sworn to rule with an iron mace,
When I met the Master face to face.

"I met Him and knew Him, and blushed to see
That His eyes, full of sorrow, were fixed on me,
And I faltered and fell at His feet that day,
While my castles melted and vanished away,—

286 The Making of the Right Kind of a Life

“Melted and vanished, and in their place
Naught did I see but the Master’s face,
And I cried aloud, ‘Oh, make me meet
To follow the steps of Thy wounded feet.’

“My thought is now for the souls of men.
I have lost my life, to find it again,
E’er since one day in a quiet place
I met the Master face to face.”

My fellow-students, on this happy baccalaureate occasion, I adjure you, choose for the commanding motive of your life, “the will of God.”

GEORGE W. TRUETT.