

# Intimate Letters on Personal Problems

by J.R. Miller

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*This sermon emphasizes the importance of letter-writing as a ministry of love and service, and how it can be a powerful way to bring comfort and encouragement to others.*

**Scripture:** John 13:35, Philippians 4:6

**Topics:** "Ministry of Encouragement", "Power of Communication"

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## Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the profound impact of personal letters in ministering to others, illustrating how heartfelt communication can provide comfort, encouragement, and strength during difficult times. He shares anecdotes of how his letters have uplifted individuals facing sorrow, doubt, and struggles, reinforcing the idea that love and support can be conveyed through written words. Miller encourages everyone to embrace the art of letter-writing as a vital ministry, reminding us that our words can serve as a reflection of Christ's love and compassion.

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## Transcript

Intimate Letters on Personal Problems

J.R. Miller, 1914

FOREWORD

Many who have been permitted to read letters written by Dr. Miller to their friends have said hungrily, "If only I might have had such a message!"

The longing is now to be gratified. Among Dr. Miller's papers were more than a score of letter-books in which copies were made of messages to his personal correspondents, known and unknown. These letters have been carefully read, and a selection is printed in this volume.

Many of those who are privileged to read these Intimate Letters on Personal Problems, will feel that a message is coming to them.

The sorrowing will find comfort;

doubters will find that faith is strengthened;

the soul-hungry will find new glimpses of Christ's beauty;

those burdened by care will rejoice in the lightening of their load;

and eager pupils in life's school will gladly note the strengthening words of him who learned the secret of helpfulness, from the Friend who was his constant Companion.

John T. Faris,

Philadelphia, May 15, 1914

## THE MINISTRY OF LETTER-WRITING

J.R. Miller, whom God called to Himself July 2, 1912, after a lifetime of ministry to others -- was famous not only as author, editor and church builder -- but also as a letter writer. And it was by his daily contact with people, in person and through the mails, that he was able to do the work which will make his name live as one who has served his fellows.

For years it was his habit on Sunday evenings, after the day's work was done, to make note of all the people of whom he had heard during the day to whom letters might do good. Of course the names of the sick went down on that list, as well as those who had recovered from sickness, those who had returned from a journey, and those who were about to leave home; those who were going to college, or parents who had heard good news from a son or a daughter at college -- in fact, everyone into whose life had come some event of special importance. As soon as possible a letter was sent, with an appropriate word of sympathy, congratulation, cheer, or good wishes.

Then he kept a complete record of all the important dates in the lives of his people -- birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and so forth -- and he marked each of these by sending a short letter of remembrance.

As if this was not enough, when he heard from acquaintances, during the week, of sickness or death in a family with which he was acquainted -- whether in his own town or in distant parts of America, or even in foreign countries -- he seized the chance to write a letter. In fact, it was the rule of his life to send each day, at least one letter of cheer to someone who was in special need. Seldom, however, did he stop with one such letter; the day's mail from his office was frequently loaded with a dozen or more messages of cheer. The chance word with the street-car conductor, or the passenger who sat by his side, or the elevator boy, or the teller at the bank -- would give him the hint that prompted a message. Perhaps the morning paper would tell him of someone who had been called to a position of honor; possibly a caller would casually mention the fact that a friend had just been married. Notes would be made of each of these opportunities for a helpful letter -- and before the day was done, the message was on its way.

Once a visitor told Dr. Miller what one of these kindly letters had meant to him. Dr. Miller told the story himself in an article urging others to write such letters. It never occurred to him that friends would know at once that he wrote the letter of which the young man spoke. This is the story, with Dr. Miller's own comment: "Only yesterday a young man took from his pocket a letter which he had carried for five years and which he had read no doubt hundreds of times. It was written when he was in great perplexity of mind and was on the point of turning into the darkness of doubt and despair. He reached out his hands for help, writing to one he knew he could trust, and laying bare to him his heart's whole burden. He received a prompt answer which, if it did nothing else, at least brought to him the consciousness of human sympathy and interest. He was not alone. One cared for him. For the time, in the darkness, he could not see Christ -- but he could see his human friend who stood close by him in love.

"The letter which came to him in answer to his heart's unburdening, proved the very word of Christ to him. For months it was all the gospel he could read. Its few strong, simple, confident sentences -- were like anchor-chains to his soul amid the waves. At last all the darkness fled away, the storms were quieted, Christ himself was revealed once more in blessed, glorious light, and holy peace filled his soul.

"But it was the letter that saved him. It was the hand of Christ to him. Is it any wonder that he cherished it as the most sacred of all his treasures? It has been kept so long and read so often, that the paper is worn out. But no money would buy it from the young man."

"I can't understand how he could keep in touch with folks as he did," a business man said a few days after Miller's death. "I have, carefully laid away, a package of messages from him. Somehow he kept track of me from the time I took my first position. Every time my salary was increased, he wrote to me. There was a letter when I was married, and more letters on wedding anniversaries. When a child was born, when there was sickness in the home, when there were financial reverses, when we were rejoicing or sorrowing for almost any special reason -- he wrote to us. And to think that he did no more for us, than for thousands of others, some of whom he had never seen!"

Dr. Miller wondered how it could be, that hundreds of people whose names he had never heard, were willing to confide in him and ask his counsel. Once he told his feeling in a letter:

"There is something very sacred in such experiences. One of the most uplifting things possible in human life is to be trusted, especially to have one come with questions and possibly troubles or difficulties, hoping and expecting to find light, comfort, or help. Nothing else in the world means quite so much to me as the fact that many people do thus put their confidence in me, taking my advice and counsel without question.

When Dr. Miller was asked to write a message as to the ministry of letter-writing, after speaking of the use the art may be to pastors, he said:

"Then others besides pastors may find many opportunities for helpfulness in letter-writing. It needs only a sensitivity which shall tell always when to write and to whom, and skill to write just the words that are needed, not too few, not too many, and never superficial; always from the heart; without platitudes, yet ever saying something worthwhile; free from sentimentality -- but breathing always the spirit of love; in no case meddlesome or intrusive -- but always sympathetic, inspired by the desire to be helpful, full of cheer.

"There is one kind of letter which we should never be guilty of writing -- letters which would discourage, which would make the heart less brave for its tasks and struggles. It is a sin to be a discourager, yet there are some people who are forever committing this sin. When we write letters, we should always have something bright and uplifting to say. If we cannot write in this strain -- we should put our letters into the wastebasket instead of into the mail box!

"When we write to those in sorrow, we need not dwell on the sad phases -- our friends know these aspects of their trouble well enough already; our letter should rather bring its word of hope, something of God's wonderful comfort. When we send a letter to one who is ill -- we are cruel if we say a word to make our friend more conscious of his illness -- too much sympathy has precisely and only this effect. It will be far kinder if we try to make our sick friend forget his illness, and lift up his heart in hope and song.

"The art of letter-writing ought not to be buried away among lost arts. It ought to be one of the fine arts of the best Christian life. No matter how busy we are, there come moments when the greatest thing we can

do, is to drop everything else and take time to write a letter to a child, to a young person at the parting of the ways, to one who is in sorrow or in struggle, or to one who is not yet clear as to his duty. It may prove the word in season for the weary. "

Dr. Miller 's belief in letter-writing as a helpful art was once shown by this message, sent to a correspondent:

"I am glad that you are able to write letters. You always write cheeringly and inspiringly. By the way, there is no form of ministry in which a person who is gifted for it, can do more good than in letter-writing. Have you seen the account of the newest league -- the League of the Golden Pen? It is not a society with officers and enrollments and dues and all that -- it is simply a league which a person makes with himself and his fellow members, promising to write at least one letter every month to some person who needs cheer and comfort, strength and help.

"I often think about Paul's prison life at Rome. When a man is shut away in prison, he is not supposed to have much opportunity of doing good. But Paul seems to have belonged to the League of the Golden Pen. At least we know that he wrote letters to many people. Four of these prison letters at least, we have preserved to us in the New Testament.

"A shut-in who cannot engage in the activities of Christian life -- but is able to write letters, can send out continually inspiration and encouragement to those who need these helps. No one knows the full value of such letters -- letters written to sick people, to those in sorrow, to those in special joy, to those who are discouraged or depressed, to those who need guidance and counsel.

"The other day a good woman came to my office and showed me a package of letters that I had written to her during a year or two when she was passing through difficult experiences -- about twenty-five years ago. They were all letters meant to lift her out of her disheartenment, to put new hope in her heart, to show her the reality of God's comfort, and to help her to make the most of her circumstances. She told me how sacredly she had kept those letters, and that she read them over frequently. She told me also how she had used them in helping other people in similar circumstances. The letters have been read and reread until some of them are literally worn out! This was a revelation to me. Of course I knew the value of letter-writing -- but I had no thought that twenty-five years after they were written, the letters would still be kept and read and reread!

"I am sure you are doing a great deal of good by your letter- writing. If you have not strength to engage in teaching as you used to do, so long as you are able to use your pen as you do now -- you need not feel that you have no opportunity of being of use any longer. Use your pen and send out every day, or as often as you can, a letter or letters which will carry lessons or inspiration to hearts and homes where they are needed. I know enough about your letters, to know that they are always bright and cheerful. I think it was Walter Scott who said, at the close of his life, that he did not know that he ever had written a single word, which he could wish to have recalled or blotted out. Not everyone can say this. It seems to me that letters should always be just what yours are -- letters which will give a new hope and encouragement.

"One of my little rules is, 'Never be a discourager.' The last place I would put discouragement, would be in a letter, because when written down it stays there, to give discouragement every time it is read again. Your letters, I am sure, never contain a discouraging word -- any sentence which would make life harder for the person to whom you have written, to make the burden heavier, to make the path seem rougher. You always write words which put new courage into hearts, new hope, new joy.

"Go on, my dear friend, in your ministry of letter-writing, and let Christ use your pen in this way for his service. God has given you a big heart -- a great fountain of love and sympathy and cheer. Let the streams pour out continually in all directions, to bless the world. Hundreds and thousands of people need encouragement and uplifting. You will scarcely meet one man or one woman in the next ten days, whom you cannot make a little stronger or braver -- by saying the right word.

"I have a habit of writing letters, not only to people in my own church, or to people with whom I am personally acquainted -- but to other people in my neighborhood who I hear are in trouble. I never have known of any case in which such a letter was unwelcome. If pastors only understood the value of letters -- how much comfort and strength they would give -- they would make very much larger use of their pens in this way, than they do!"

John T. Faris,

Philadelphia, May 15, 1914

## GETTING ALONG WITH OTHERS

### Paying the Debt of Love

Dear friend,

One who is ready to serve others, will always have abundant opportunities for such service. Love never gets its debts paid off. You know Paul exhorts us to owe no man anything, but love. He implies that we never can pay off all love's debts, or even if we do get them paid off at the close of some happy day -- we shall find them waiting at our door in the morning, as clamorous as ever. Of course, LOVE is the law of Christian life. We cannot be Christlike -- unless we do love. "By this all men will know that you are My disciples -- if you love one another." John 13:35. But oh! is not love tremendously costly sometimes?

I preached last evening to the young people on the kind of friend they should take into their lives. Among other things, I spoke of the fact that in engaging to be one's friend, we do not know what our engagement means, what we covenant to do, what burdens to carry, what sufferings to endure, what patience may be required of us, what toil and care and bearing of loads. Nevertheless, love must never flinch from paying the full price. I know that often people assert very strong friendship for others and are sincere enough in their hearts at the time. But I have oftentimes seen these people, when the need for service came, flinch, unable to measure up to of their own engagements.

Yet, do not understand that I am complaining. There is no other life like that of love. Nothing brings us so much happiness -- as living for others, giving out our lives in sweet helpfulness, whatever the cost may be. So I congratulate you on the opportunity you are having for self-denial and costly serving of others. You remember Jesus said that he who saves his life, loses it -- while he who loses his life for the Master's sake, saves it. That is, the only way to save our lives -- to make them grow into beauty, to reach up into strength, is to give them out, empty them, to sacrifice them in whatever ways we may be called upon to do. He who flinches at calls for self-denial, he who withdraws himself and holds back his life from pain and cost at love's demands, is losing that which he thinks he is saving.

I am sure that God will answer your prayers, making you brave and keeping you sweet and patient in all the experiences through which you are called to pass. The Master never leads us anywhere, without making provision for us. He never asks us to do impossibilities. Of course, he asks us to do many things

that seem to us to be impossibilities -- that would be, to human strength unhelped. But even these hardest things become easy, when we meet them in Christ's name, with his hand upon our heads, with his strength in our hearts.

You remember Augustine's prayer which he used to make so often, "Command what you will -- and give what you command." We need not fear any commands which God gives to us, nor shrink from any duties which he assigns to us, because we know that whenever he does thus lay upon us burdens too heavy for us to bear with our own feeble strength -- he always means to give us what we need. I like Paul's words, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Regarding your share in the happiness of others in their wedded lives, I understand your feeling. But, my dear child, the sweetest happiness which we can get in the world, comes from adding a little to the happiness of others. I know it is not easy when the hungry heart cries out for bread, to see others eating to the full, when we cannot ourselves have even a crumb for our own hunger. But, after all, we do get many crumbs -- indeed, the best bread, is the bread from Heaven, the bread of Christ's love! Enter more and more deeply and fully into the love of Christ, and let that love fill your heart.

I believe that God does not require us to crush or destroy anything in us that he has created. Buddha's theory of life, is that happiness will be reached by destroying the appetites and desires. Christ's theory is that happiness comes in the satisfaction of these desires and yearnings, not, of course, in baser ways -- but in the higher ways. If the Master has denied to you the earthly satisfaction your heart craves so ardently, be sure that he means you to find that satisfaction in the higher things. Open your heart to the divine love. Spread your sails -- and catch the upper currents.

The secret of a beautiful life is living in unbroken fellowship with Christ, under the influence of His presence and the inspiration of His love and grace. If we could get this same realization of the divine presence into our life, it would mean everything to us. You remember that phrase that is quoted so often in these days -- "practicing the presence of God." We all say we believe that God is with us all the time, that Christ is ever by our side, closer than the nearest friend. Let us practice this belief. Let us act as if it were true. This is a wonderful lesson if we can learn it. I give it to you today, hoping that it may have its help and blessing for you in your own life.

Doing One's Best

Dear friend,

I rejoice with you in the success you are having not only in your work -- but personally. Evidently you have become the center of a good influence which is reaching out and touching many other lives. I said last Sunday in speaking of work, that we are not first to be carpenters or doctors or artists or lawyers -- but are, first of all, to be Christians. Whatever we do in our ordinary secular work, if that is all there is of us -- we are failing of our best. The life in us should pour out through our vocation, through all our ordinary work -- and like fragrance, like the light, to bless the world. That is what you are doing. You are an artist and a teacher of art -- but you are also far more. You are a Christian woman, with a heart full of love for Christ, which is always . . .

pouring out its gentle influences,

touching the lives of others,

sweetening homes,

warming hearts, and

inspiring people to live better, more beautifully, more worthily, more helpfully.

This is my little sermon for you this month. It is not a sermon -- but a bit of encouragement. But I believe that encouragement is very often the best that we can give to our friends. I am sure that encouragement is far better for a child than nagging. Even some good fathers and mothers seem in their family discipline and in the exercise of their love for their children, never to get any further than "Don't."

I am interested very much in what you say about your "bird-man." There are some men who seem to have a genius for nature. Birds and animals of all kinds seem to know them and form friendships with them. There are men who stay about our parks, only loafers or tramps, perhaps -- but with whom the little animals are as familiar as a child would be with its own mother. Everyone has his own particular place in the world, and it may be that some of those we think of as entirely useless people, are really doing a good deal more for the blessing of the world than we imagine.

The last page of your letter amuses me. You say that you have sometimes felt quite like giving up your art, Sunday-school work and everything else. If this really is an accurate statement of your condition at any time in your life, it must be when you are very much exhausted, or when you have eaten something for your supper, which you ought not to have eaten. A great many of our unhappy moods, are the result of careless or indiscreet living. If people would only learn not to overeat, not to eat when they should not eat, not to eat what they should not eat, and always to eat sparingly and non-indulgently -- they would be a great deal better Christians and a great deal happier, and would do very much more work.

### Stumbling Blocks

Dear friend,

There are several ways that people may put stumbling blocks in the way of others. A stumbling block is something lying in the path, over which the unwary pedestrian falls. Applied in a moral or spiritual sense -- it means anything which interferes with the earnest, straightforward and happy Christian life of others. I suppose the thought usually in mind is: anything that influences another to be less faithful in duty, or which makes it harder for another person to live a Christian life.

As you suggest, we can put stumbling blocks in the way of others, by inconsistencies in our own life. For example, if parents are not faithful as Christians, do things they ought not to do, or leave undone things they ought to do -- they are apt to hurt the lives of their children who are growing up under their influence. The very best instruction, the most faithful teaching, will not avail -- if the life of the parent or teacher does not, at least in very large measure, corroborate and confirm the lessons.

The application may be made to all Christian people in the community. We are the representatives of Christ. The world cannot see Christ, and it does not read the Bible -- and, therefore, does not know just what it is that Christ requires. We are required to live so, that in our lives, the world may learn what Christ is. If we stumble, therefore -- that is, if we do not live as we should do -- we hurt the cause of Christ in those who are watching us, and, besides, do harm to those who, probably, if our example were different -- might be led to follow Christ themselves.

I think you have heard me tell this incident of Miss Havergal. Just after having been confirmed in an Episcopal church she went to a large girls school, with a heart full of love for the Savior, and with a mind intent upon faithfully witnessing for him. But she was startled to learn that she was the only Christian in all the hundred girls in the institution. All the rest were worldly, high-society girls, with no thought of Christ. Her first feeling was that she could not confess Christ among those girls. Her second and better thought, however, was that she could not but confess him. "I am the only one Christ has in this school," she said. This made her very strong, and, sustained by the grace of Christ, she went on quietly confessing her Savior in all her disposition and life, as well as by her words -- deeply influencing in time all the school. If she, being the only Christian in the school, had lived carelessly, as so many girls do when they are away from home -- she would have been a stumbling block in the way of the others.

There are other ways in which we may become stumbling blocks. I suppose whatever in us, whether in act or word, discourages another, makes life harder for another -- puts a stumbling block in the other's way. It seems to me we should all live, so as to be helpful to others in every possible way. If one of our friends is carrying a heavy burden, and we say something which discourages him, or makes it harder for him to walk with his heavy load on his shoulder -- is not that a stumbling block cast in his way? Just so, unkindnesses to others, make stumbling blocks. Whatever in us, in our acts, or in our words, makes it harder for other people to live -- is a stumbling block which we cast in their way.

I am very glad indeed to learn what you say about your friend who has come into your life, and with whom you are enjoying such pleasant fellowship. Evidently your prayer has been answered. You will be very helpful to each other, the one encouraging the other. No privilege is sweeter than that of kneeling, side by side, with one whom we love, and praying together for each other and for our families and friends and for our church and for the interests of God's kingdom. I am very glad indeed, that God has heard your prayer and has brought you two together in such pleasant and cordial relations. You remember there is a special promise which says, "If two of you shall agree" -- so you see this gives you added power in prayer. If you two agree to ask God for anything, the promise is doubly strong that he will grant your request.

#### The Lesson of Self-control

Dear friend,

The lesson of self-control which you are trying to learn, is never an easy one. In fact, it is the great lesson of life. It is a lesson we should always try to learn. Nothing can make one more weak, or put one more in peril at every point -- than the lack of self-control. These runaway tongues of ours, are worse than wild horses when they get started! You remember what James says about the tongue in his little Epistle. He makes it out to be a very unruly member indeed, full of fearful power to hurt others. I need not, however, dilate upon this, nor write an essay upon the sins of the tongue.

What I want to say, is that you must not be discouraged because you have not yet succeeded in learning to control yourself. You remember the old saying, "If at first you don't succeed -- try, try again." This is a teaching which we should always keep with us. However often we may fail -- we should start over again, determined to master. Conquest is very slow, and it takes a long time to get the mastery. We have recently had in our Sunday-school lessons, the story of Moses. After forty years in Egypt, when he had had the best training that any man could get, he showed himself utterly incapable of self-government. His quick temper and rashness got him into trouble, for he killed an Egyptian in his anger. He was then compelled to flee away from Egypt, sacrificing everything he had toiled for all these forty years. This

suggests the terrible harm, the lack of self-control sometimes does one. It costs tremendously.

But you remember also that God took Moses then, and kept him for forty years in the wilderness as a shepherd with a flock of sheep. During those forty years, Moses learned self-control and came back at eighty years of age and led his people out of Egypt. During forty years more of the most terrible trials any man ever had, Moses never once lost his temper until near the very close of the period, when again, in a sore trial, he did lose control of himself and spoke unadvisedly. What I want to show to you is that even great men, like Moses, have found long and sore discipline necessary, before they could learn the lesson which you say you have not yet learned.

There is one little sentence, however, in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews which gives the secret of Moses' victory over himself, that "he endured as seeing Him who is invisible!" Hebrews 11:27. That is, Moses always remembered that God was right beside him, his friend to help him -- and this made him strong. He did not actually see God -- but it was as if he saw Him. That is, he realized the divine presence in all his life, and learned his lessons under this blessed influence.

If you saw Christ standing beside you all the time, it would not be hard for you to keep sweet, to keep control of temper and speech. Well, Christ IS beside you -- just as really as he was beside Mary when she sat at his feet in Bethany, or beside Peter and the other disciples as they walked together over the hills of Judea and Galilee. What you need, is to realize this fact. We know that God is present with us all the time, at every moment, by day or by night. He is closer than any human friend can be to us. Indeed, we are to practice His presence -- that is, we are to live all the time, as if we actually saw Him!

I have said enough to help you in this direction. Think it out for yourself. You must remember that Christ is always besides you, not only to see you -- but to help you, as your truest and best Friend -- and you will soon get the mastery.

### Entering into the Lives of Others

Dear friend,

I have no doubt that you were wisely guided in your decision to resign your teaching work for next year. I think you need a time of freedom from such a strain as teaching necessarily involves. These months of rest, with no tasks to think of, will give you the opportunity to build up the weary body and get strong again. Teaching is never easy. The fact that you have to be on hand every morning at nine o'clock and go by a schedule through all the school hours of the day, day after day, week after week, month after month, makes a pressure upon nerve and brain, which cannot but be exhausting. People often talk about the easy time teachers have, with only five or six hours a day of work, and only five days in the week, with only ten months in the year -- but the teacher who is conscientious, as you are, and does her work well, preparing for it carefully and minutely, then carrying her pupils on her heart all the time in loving interest, almost as tender as a mother's -- draws heavily upon her resources.

Some people teach without much outlay of emotion, because they teach mechanically, not really loving their pupils or taking any responsibility beyond the faithful performance of the classroom duties. But that is not the kind of teacher you are. You put your whole heart into your work in such a way, that when the day is done, you are exhausted. I am glad therefore that you can have a year of rest.

I am sorry that you have had a little extra burden to carry at home. I suppose a person with your warm heart cannot help entering into the lives of one's own in such a way as to suffer vicariously as you are doing. I have been trying for a good while to teach my people, however, that all they can do for their friends, even their closest and dearest friends, is to keep them bound by prayer fast around the feet of God with chains of gold. Sometimes we can speak to our friends who are not doing quite right and by loving exhortation help them out of their danger -- but very often such efforts only do harm and not good. I think even many mothers do a good deal too much talking to their children in the way of reproof or correction.

Take a case in point. There is a young man in whom I am very deeply interested, whose life I have been watching very closely for several years. He is married and has a little family. Three or four months ago, his wife came to me and told me in perfect confidence of his yielding to certain temptations, and asked me to talk with him. I told her very frankly that we would have to be exceedingly careful if we were to help him and save him. I promised her to do all I could but begged her not to say much herself -- but to pray a great deal, assuring her that I would pray too, and if the opportunity came, would speak to him. The opportunity has not come yet, and perhaps it may never come. But I have been praying a great deal and his wife has been praying too -- and we have prayed together several times for him. Last Sunday the wife slipped a note in my hand as she went out of the church door, telling me that she believed the danger was all past. The comfort is that God has heard the prayers -- and touched the man's heart. I have sought meanwhile to interest him in certain lines of church work. I have also cautiously asked some of the men to interest themselves in him -- but I have not said a word to him.

I merely refer to this incident to tell you that I believe, after a good many years of experimenting in the Master's work, that we can do most for people in their times of danger, indirectly and by prayer. I do not know what the particular danger is in your sister's case -- but God knows, and you can talk to him very frankly, telling him your perplexity, and asking him to do the thing that is best.

Individuality is most sacred. We cannot touch another person's life without the other person's consent. We cannot force even our love upon people, nor compel them to do what is right. All we can do, all that even a parent can do for a child -- is to use our influence, and let God do the rest. The moment we try to use any compulsion or to urge a person in any way but through the conscience and heart -- we are violating the sanctity of personality and also endangering the life.

Did you ever try to open a rose a day or two before its natural time for opening? If you did, you know that it would have been better if you had waited a day or two and let the rose open in its own way, under the influence of the sun and the dew.

You ask me if I have any idea as to what God is trying to do with you. Indeed I have not, but my comfort is that God himself has a very distinct idea of what He is going to do with you. I think you have a book of mine in which there is an article called, "God's Slow Making of Us." If so, it may have a suggestion or two in answer to your question. It is a great comfort to you, to know that God is not hacking away at the block of marble without any thought of what he is going to make. Even a common sculptor has something in his mind, of what he means to hew the marble into -- and I am sure God never begins work on the human mind without an ideal. The Germans say, "Every man's life is a plan of God." The thought is very beautiful, and is also true. In the experiences through which we pass, we know that there is an eye watching, and a wisdom overruling, and that all things are so directed -- that in the end God's ideal for our lives shall be realized.

## Blessed -- Or Being a Blessing

Dear friend,

I am glad to know of the encouragement you have at college in your Young Women's Christian Association work. I am glad to know you are so happy in your work. My heart goes out to you continually in affectionate interest, and in longing that you may be blessed -- and be a blessing. These two phases of life should always go together -- indeed, they cannot well be separated. If we are blessed -- then we ought to be and cannot help being a blessing. There are two ranges of windows in every life -- one range toward God, and one toward the world. We should keep both open all the while. We should keep every window open toward God, that we may receive continually the blessings which he would send to us from Heaven. Nothing is sadder than to have one's windows toward Heaven closed, so that when the blessings are sent to us from God's heart -- they find no entrance. This is the way too many people live. They leave God out altogether. They have no windows open toward Heaven. The blessings fall upon them -- but find no admittance, and they remain unblessed. But you always keep the windows open, every window, and God is pouring into your heart continually, the richest blessings of His love.

Then the windows on the other side, should also be kept open toward the world. That is the way God wants us to live. He does not give us blessings, just to keep for ourselves. Indeed, nothing becomes our own really and truly, until we have passed it on, until we have given it to some other one. Things we keep for ourselves -- only spoil in our hands and in our hearts, and nothing good comes of them. It is only when we give out again to others, what God gives us -- that we are blessed. This is the way you are living too. You keep your heart open toward your girls all the while, and everything God gives to you -- you pass to them. Your letter is full of this thought -- the eagerness of your heart to be a blessing to those among whom you are laboring.

It is my most earnest prayer that God will enrich you in all ways, in your own life, through your own experiences, that you may be truly a blessing to all about you. You need not have any fear that the girls will not come to you. As I have said to you before, I believe one of the dangers of Christian workers, is a little overeagerness, that is, a desire which finds expression a little too evidently, to help others. This has always been one of my own dangers. In my earnest desire to be of use, I have sometimes frightened people away, or, at least, have made them a little shy. As a rule, we help people best -- when they do not know we are helping them. At least, we find quickest and closest access to them, when we do not show that we are eager and desirous to do them good. Not many people really care about being helped in a set and purposed way. I am satisfied that the best work of our life, is done when we restrain our desire and hold our eagerness in reserve. You know how it destroys a rose, to try to open it before it opens naturally. The same is true of human lives. We must not open them -- God must do that, and all we can do is to wait until they open naturally.

I am sure that a great many pastors and workers in various lines of Christian service, need to learn this lesson. Sometimes we have to wait for a long time before the occasion comes when we can really give a person the blessing, the comfort, the help, the inspiration -- which we wish to give him. You must not fear, therefore, that you cannot find access to the girls. You love them and you are praying for them continually. One by one, when the time is ripe, they will come to you and you will have the opportunity of saying to them, the word it is in your heart to say; and doing for them, the kindness that you wish to do, or giving them the help or the blessing which you are so eager to give unto them. You want God to send them to you -- and He will.

## Helping Others

Dear friend,

Your work seems to have been increasing since I saw you. I suppose there is some compensation in the extra money it brings in, especially as you told me you were living on a pretty close margin with your present income. I wish there were some way to make your regular income larger, so that you would have no such anxiety about making ends meet. I trust that something better will come by and by -- that you will be able to live without so much care. You speak about some people being hard to help. I suppose this comes from two things -- first, because life yields very slowly to deep and permanent impressions, especially good and uplifting impressions; secondly, because we cannot always tell when we are helping people the most, and in the best way.

There is no doubt that influences toward evil are much more apt to make instant impression, than influences toward good. There certainly is something in our nature which causes us to gravitate naturally downward, toward things that are less beautiful. I remember a prayer of Fenelon's: "Lord, take me -- for I cannot give myself to you. And when you have me -- keep me, for I cannot keep myself. And save me in spite of myself, for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen." I suppose this prayer voices the experience of almost anyone who is sincere and thoughtful and truly striving toward the best things.

We all understand this inward tendency toward things which are not beautiful and good. The way toward Heaven is always upward -- and takes climbing. You remember that a ladder was Jacob's vision of life. What we find to be true in ourselves in our efforts to reach better things -- is also true of others whom we desire to help. There is something in them, too, as well as in us, which resists good impressions. Therefore, it is hard for us to do them good in moral and spiritual ways.

On the other hand, we cannot tell really when we are doing good, or making impressions. Ofttimes we think we are not affecting the people at all by what we say or do -- while really we are putting into their hearts impulses, inspirations, which will ultimately come to full fruitage in blessing and good. I think that nothing good is ever really lost. The good words we speak and the good things we do as we go along through life, may seem to have no effect; but the good seed is not lost, even though it does not grow in the hearts in which we seek to plant it. You know what Charles Kingsley says about the seed that falls by the wayside and is picked up by the birds -- that, though the birds get it, yet the birds are fed. That is, if your efforts do not do just that which you hoped they would do, help the person you want to help -- yet the good, itself, is not lost -- but touches some other person's life with benediction and beauty.

The last verse of the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians has always been a wonderful comfort to me -- "Your labor is not in vain in the Lord." Paul had spoken, throughout the chapter, of resurrection and the immortal life and this thought in the close of the wonderful passage, suggests to us that everything we do lays hold upon infinity and eternity. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord -- knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." It will go on forever. Even if the good effort seems to fail today and tomorrow, and unto the end of our life -- still it has eternity to work in, and sometime, somewhere, in some way, it will be a blessing.

## Talking About Oneself

Dear friend,

You certainly have misunderstood the chapter in one of my books, to which you refer, about "Talking of Oneself." The people I refer to in the article, are those who talk to everybody about themselves and about nothing else. Only two or three days ago, I had a call from such a person -- indeed, I see the person quite often. He will talk about nothing else but himself. He is a clergyman, and, of course, a very great man, and, no doubt, there is a great deal to talk about. But from the time when he comes in, until he goes out -- there is no chance for even a mere suggestion concerning anything else than the speaker himself. They said that Lord Macaulay, while the greatest speaker England ever knew, could in no possible sense be called a conversationalist. He never gave the other man a chance for a word. But the beauty of Macaulay, however, was that he did not talk about himself, but about the great themes that filled his mind.

A lady told me last summer about her pastor. She said that he called at her home one afternoon about two o'clock. She had a number of engagements for the afternoon, and was very impatient to get away. But the pastor began to talk, not about himself -- but about the things that lay nearest his heart, and never left the house until a quarter past six -- when her tea bell rang and gave him an intimation that he had better be going.

The visitor to whom I referred before is not this sort of man. He talks about himself, his own work, what he has been doing, what people say about him, the great achievements he has made, and all such matters. He has only one virtue -- he is not a morbid, retrospective person, does not talk about his ailments, his sufferings, his personal troubles -- but about his greatness, his wisdom, his high attainments, and so forth.

But let me say to you in a word that I believe most sincerely in talking about oneself as you do. A great many people are the same way. They never talk about themselves to people in general. Those who see them every day would not know they ever had a care or a pain or suffered in any way. But they need some person, to whom they can unburden themselves, just as a sick patient does to a physician. You might just as well say that it is not right for you to tell your physician all about your disease, as to say that you should not tell all your spiritual experiences and spiritual needs to one who may be able to help you. I am sure you do not talk about your physical condition in detail to anybody but your physician.

Have you ever thought that the way Christ nearly always helps people, is through human friends? He does not come himself in person, in bodily presence. Ordinarily he sends someone, because we cannot, in our human condition, receive spiritual help directly -- we need a mediator. My work as a Christian teacher and a Christian minister is to represent Christ, to interpret Christ, not only in my words -- but in my life. Some person longs to know a little about the love of Christ -- and Christ sends him to me. Some man is struggling with terrible temptation. He must have the human touch, the clasp of the human hand, the encouragement of the human voice, the beating of the human heart; so Christ sends him to me that I may show him a little at least of the divine compassion, the divine affection, the divine sympathy, a little of the divine encouragement. Just so far as I represent Christ truly, do I become a real help to those who need me.

I think you understand now just what I mean by the article to which you refer. I am sure you understand that I do not have any reference at all to such revealings of oneself as you have made to me when you wished to have my help.

You probably know some people of the kind I referred to in the article. I know some people that I never dare ask when I meet them, "How are you today?" If I put the greeting in that form -- I am sure to get a long narrative of sufferings, pains, bad colds, restless nights, dreary days, and a hundred other things

which belong to the list of human ills. I have one man in mind now whom I always very carefully greet with a simple "Good morning," not giving him any chance to speak of his condition. Then when he begins his list of ailments, I try by some cheerful word to divert his mind from its sad strain into a more cheerful and happy mood.

I mortally offended a young woman who came to me the other day with a long and sad story. The case was a sad one -- a home with feeble parents, money all gone, and pinching need facing the family. I took the matter up at once in a very practical way, trying to find something for the girl to do -- that is what she came to me for. Then, having done this, I merely said to her: "Now, my child, try to be brave and cheerful. Do your duty and trust God, and he will take care of you. She wrote the same night a long letter, telling me that I had hurt her very sorely by not showing her any sympathy. She said that when she told me her troubles, instead of sympathizing with her -- I merely said, "Be brave, my child." She wanted to have condolence of a kind which I never give to any person.

You know enough about me to know that my aim is never to make people 's burdens heavier by talking about them, and dwelling upon their sad features -- but to put cheer and encouragement into their hearts, so that they can rise up in new strength and go bravely on in their allotted experiences. This is the true secret of the art of being a comforter. The word "comfort" means to strengthen, and the true comforter is the one who tries to make others stronger. If I can take away the trouble, of course it may be better for me to do it. Ordinarily we cannot lessen the burden, and all we can do is to make the burden bearer a little stronger to go on keeping his load.

What I want to say to you, is that the truest friend is not the one who sits down beside you and goes over the painful experiences of your life with you in detail, merely for the sake of showing sympathy -- but the one who, having listened sympathetically and lovingly to the recital of your sufferings or your pain -- then begins to be a healer, a physician.

## GROWING IN GRACE

Near the Heart of Christ

Dear friend,

I am glad to find that you are so happy in your spiritual life. Sometimes people who are ill get discouraged, and their discouragement dims the brightness of their spiritual vision. As Tennyson puts it in one of his poems, the darkness gets into their heart -- and darkens their eyes. Many a person who is suffering from illness, makes the suffering many times worse by permitting shadows to gather and obscure the face of God. I am so glad, however, that in your case, your joy is not disturbed, your peace is not broken. You are living near the heart of Christ, and there you always have light about you. You remember that Jesus once said, "He who follows me shall not walk in darkness." The reason he gave for this, was that he himself is the light of the world. Light streams from him and all those who keep near to him find themselves in the light, however dark it may be a little way off around them.

The peace of God is a wonderful blessing. Beginning with peace with God when we come to Christ and find forgiveness, the blessing deepens, until we are kept ourselves, folded up, as it were, in God's own very peace. Few promises mean more than that one of Jesus in John 14:27 -- "Peace I leave with you -- My peace I give unto you." It is his own peace that he bequeathed to his followers. We know what Christ's peace was -- he was never disturbed. All around him, storms played. The waves of trouble dashed against

him. But amid all the sufferings and buffetings, his heart was ever at peace. Even on the cross, when he was dying, he did not lose his peace. It was still, "My God, my God." It is very sweet to think that we may have the very peace of Christ. Paul tells us also that the peace of God will guard our heart and thoughts in Jesus Christ -- that is, when we refuse to be anxious about anything, and instead bring all the troubles and trials and sufferings to God in prayer. Those verses in the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians are very precious. I am sure you understand them and have learned to live by them.

Then that old promise in Isaiah is wonderful -- "You will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you." The keeping is God's -- we cannot keep ourselves -- but he can do it. Our part is simply trust -- the staying of our mind upon God.

But I need not go over even these precious things, for I am sure you understand them. I merely write to remind you of them, that you may have fresh assurance of the eternal hiding place in which you are nestling, your heart's refuge in the eternal God, your life hid with Christ.

Replying to your question, "How can one come to feel the personal presence of Christ?" I would say that we need to be careful not to depend too much upon feeling in the matter of our spiritual relations. Peter speaks of Christ as one of whom, not having seen, we love, on whom though now we see him not, yet believing we rejoice. There is a difference between a friend whom we can see, whose touch we can feel, on whose arm we can lean, whose voice we can hear -- and one who is invisible to us. Yet Christ is just as near to us as the closest human friend who stands by our side, into whose face we can look, from whose spoken words we receive warmth and inspiration. As to his human body, Christ is in Heaven -- but he says in his last promise to his disciples, "I am with you always. "

For example, I do not see Christ while I am writing this letter to you -- but I know that he is nearer to me than the closest human friend could be. I know that he is right by me, that he sees me and knows my thoughts and feelings, that he loves me and thinks about me and cheers and inspires and encourages me. So Christ has become to me the most real friend in all the world. I try to think of him continually, and always to love him as I would love him if I saw him. I tell him my difficulties and questions and temptations, my needs, and talk with him about my friends, and those who come to me for help. Thus I try to live all my life with Christ in the closest companionship. "Surely, I am with you always, even to the end of the age!" Matthew 28:20. "He Himself has said: I will never leave you or forsake you!" Hebrews 13:5.

Yet I have never seen him, never heard his voice, never felt his touch. If we believe in the existence of Christ and his presence with us, according to his promise -- he will become as real to us as he was to Mary and Martha, sitting at his feet and listening to his words, or to John as he lay upon his bosom at the supper table. Such relations with Christ cannot but establish between him and us a very real and personal friendship. We are sure that he is our friend, and, believing in his love, trusting and following him, living with him -- will soon lead us to love him. There is a verse in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews which says about Moses that "he endured, as seeing him who is invisible." Moses never saw God with human eyes -- but God was so real to Moses that it was as if he saw him. The faith of Moses made God's presence a constant reality to him.

I am not certain that what I have said will help you directly -- but I am sure this is the way to get the blessing you want to get. You must believe what Christ says about his love and care for you, about his presence with you, and his desire to help you. Your faith will thus make him a reality to you. Then you and Christ will become such close and familiar friends, that you will soon learn to walk with him, to live with

him.

Let me guard you against trying to have any vision of Christ, or against feeling in this matter. The craving for feeling in spiritual relations, is harmful. Christ is not with us in human form. He said to Mary on that Easter Day, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father." The old natural relations were not restored. We need to guard against the same craving, for it never can be realized -- but what is realized, the spiritual relation, is far higher and purer and more real.

To One Who Wants to Get Close to Christ

Dear friend,

I am not going to ask you to tell me anything more about your trouble than you have told me already. When you are ready for it, you will open your heart to me fully. Meanwhile, let me say to you that you must open your heart to Christ. You need not fear to tell him anything which concerns you. Of course, he knows all about it -- but he wants you to tell it, nevertheless. When you read this letter, will you not fall on your knees and tell Christ out of your deepest heart, in simplest, most childlike way, precisely what it is that is imperiling your life, or casting a shadow over you, hiding the face of the Master from you? You say you do not get near to Christ, and that it is because you will not. The reason you give, is the only reason that ever keeps anyone away from the utmost closeness to the heart of the Savior. He once said, "You will not come to me, that you might have life." He longs to have us not only come to him -- but come very close to him. Christ hungers for our full confidence, for our most trusting love, and then for our most faithful obedience.

But let me say to you that there need not be a single day more of this pain or sorrow in your heart. You have only to creep back into the bosom of that Friend, who loves you more than anyone in all the world loves you. I was teaching our teachers last Monday evening the lesson for next Sunday -- the Fifty-first Psalm -- and I spoke particularly of the completeness, the fullness and the gladness of God's forgiveness. He not only blots out the record of our sins against us, and washes us until every stain is gone, until we are whiter than snow -- but he takes us back into his own heart so speedily that it is as if we never had sinned at all!

He says, "Our sins and our iniquities, He will remember no more against us forever." The very memory of our wrongdoing fades from the mind of God when he forgives us, so full is his love -- so rich, so tender, so overflowing. Whatever it is, therefore, that has been in any sense hiding the face of Christ from you, put it away and be sure that you will be received into your old place, with all the infinite love of your Savior's heart.

But I need not write more. You understand and I want you always to know with what loving interest I shall pray for you all the days until I know my letter has reached you. It will all be right, and you must not be discouraged. You must not stay a day in the shadows. Come out into the full sunlight -- and you will be surprised at the great joy which your heart will have.

God with His People

Dear friend,

First of all I am going to send you a Bible today. Please accept this as a Christmas token. Nothing can be better for the day that means so much to a thoughtful heart, than the Book which tells of the wonderful

love of God. I will send you a Bible which has good type and which I think you will like. It is the American Revision, and you will find it quite different in a good many words and expressions from the old King James Version, which I suppose you have used at home all your life. But I like the Revision and use it myself.

If I were to make any request of you regarding the use of this Bible, it would be that you first read over the first four Gospels in the New Testament -- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I would like you to read them thoughtfully and carefully, with a little prayer each day that God would help you to know Christ better and better, and to receive him into your everyday life. Many people think about Christ as a glorious Being, living far off in the brightness of Heaven. This is true, of course -- but it is only part of the truth. You know those lines of Browning's:

God's in his Heaven -- All's right with the world. Certainly, God is in his Heaven -- but he's also right on his earth.

The experience you relate illustrates this truth. I feel, just as you do, that the coming of the trained nurse in her carriage right to the lonely spot where your sister was so ill, was not a mere coincidence. I know some people would say that such a feeling as you and I have about the matter is superstitious, or at least they would try to make us believe that it was purely accidental. But I am not disturbed by such opinions as these. More and more do I believe in the immanence of God and his personal interest and activity in the affairs of people 's lives. When Jesus said to his disciples, "Surely, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world," he certainly meant what he said.

We cannot deny the omnipresence of God. There is no spot in the world where he is not. There is a story of an atheist whose little girl attended a Sunday school, and was taught some of the simple elementary truths of the Christian religion. One day her father was writing some words for her, teaching her to spell, and wrote this -- "God is nowhere." He asked the little girl if she could read the words. She spelled them out -- "God is now here." The child's misreading of the father's sentence startled him and led to his own conversion. Always we can say, "God is now here."

The teaching of Christ is that he is with his own followers and friends, in a peculiar manner manifesting himself to them, as he does not manifest himself to the world. Take that saying of the Master -- "The very hairs of your head are all numbered." This does not mean that God actually counts the hairs of our heads. But the expression is meant to teach us that the smallest things in our lives, the smallest incidents, the smallest events, the smallest needs, are taken notice of by our Father -- and that nothing, however little it may be, or insignificant, is overlooked or forgotten by him. I need not go further with this defense of the belief which has such a strong place in your heart. The doctrine of the immanence of God, is that he is in this world as truly as the air we breathe.

We are all the time, in the presence of God. In him we live and move and have our being. Then God loves us. We are his children. If the name "Father" applied to God has any meaning at all, it must mean more than the word "father" or "mother" means as applied to our human relationships. Can we say that our heavenly Father is less kind, less thoughtful, less compassionate, less attentive to the needs of his children -- than human fathers and mothers are to the needs of their children?

I am sure, therefore, that the incident which you described as occurring last summer, was really an expression of God's thought and care of you and your sister in your dire need. The Old Testament tells about Hagar and her child -- when the child was dying of thirst, and the mother could do nothing but sit by

and listen to her child's cries, an angel came and showed her a spring of water. The teaching of the Bible is not that God is always working miracles for us. He helps us first in natural ways, through our own strength or wit or wisdom or ingenuity, or through the interposition of our friends. But when no human help is available, then God comes himself.

### Underneath Are The Everlasting Arms

Dear friend,

I write to you a little note at once, before you leave your old home. I am sorry that you have had so much care and anxiety in preparing for your change of residence. I hope that everything is settled now and that you will have nothing further to disturb or distract you. I wish I were near enough to you to be of some little use to you, for I would love to help you in your life. All I can do at this distance, however, is to speak to God for you in prayer, asking him to give you quietness and confidence and peace, and then to write to you whenever you wish me to do so, to say my word of encouragement and uplifting to you.

The sweetest life is the one which nestles the most quietly and unquestioningly in the bosom of Jesus. I always like that picture of John which we have at the Last Supper, when he leaned upon Christ's bosom. It seems such an ideal place for anyone to lean. Especially it is a place in which those who are suffering, those who are weak and broken in health, those who have any sorrow or care -- may nestle.

There is a verse, too, in the Old Testament which seems to belong under this picture -- "The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms." Deuteronomy 33:27. Embracing arms suggest a father's love, or the love of a very dear and trusted friend. It is very sweet for a child to nestle thus in the arms of father and mother. The embrace suggests not only affection -- but support, protection, shelter, secure keeping. The strongest and gentlest human arms will some day fall away, unclasping their embrace. But the arms of God are "everlasting." Nothing can ever unbind them from us. Nothing can ever snatch us out of those arms!

We know that when once enfolded in the love of God -- we shall be kept there forever. Whatever human arms may have dropped away from their embrace of you, or may hereafter drop away, you know that the arms of God will always enfold you in warm, tender, strong affection.

Another precious word in this old text is the word "underneath." The arms are always underneath. No matter how low one sinks away in suffering, or weakness, or pain, or trial -- still and always underneath are the everlasting arms.

I want you to feel that God's love is everlasting, that his grace is eternal, that the protection you have in him is something that never can be disturbed. Earth's nests are all liable to be torn to pieces, for nothing here is stable and sure. Even the giant mountain peaks, shall molder away. But the love of God remains ever the same. Here is another text which you will like: "The mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, says the Lord that has mercy on you."

Excuse my little sermon -- but I want to help to give you strength and confidence, when you have had so much to perplex and disturb you. Do not be afraid of anything. God is taking care of you. Read the One hundred and twenty-first Psalm, the day you move -- it is sometimes called "The Traveler's Psalm."

Refuge in Ch

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