

Kindness That Comes Too Late

by J.R. Miller

The sermon urges the congregation to express kindness and appreciation to others while they are alive, rather than waiting until after their death.

Scripture: Proverbs 12:25, Ecclesiastes 3:1, Romans 12:10, Galatians 6:2, Ephesians 4:32, Colossians 3:12-14, 1 Thessalonians 5:11, Hebrews 3:13, James 1:19, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Kindness", "Appreciation in Life"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the importance of expressing kindness and appreciation to the living rather than waiting until after death, using the example of a woman who anointed Jesus with perfume while he was alive. He reflects on how often kind words and gestures are reserved for funerals, where they lose their impact and meaning for the deceased. Miller urges listeners to break open their 'alabaster boxes' of love and gratitude now, to uplift those who are weary and struggling in life. He highlights that true kindness should be shared while people can still feel its warmth, rather than being wasted on the dead. Ultimately, he calls for a shift in how we express our affection, advocating for a life filled with encouragement and support for one another.

Transcript

I have always been glad that there was one who brought out her alabaster vase, and anointed the Lord beforehand for his burial. Most people would have waited, keeping the vase sealed, until he was dead, and would then have broken it to anoint his body when it lay, torn, wounded and cold, wrapped in the garments of burial. But she did not wait. She opened the jar while he could enjoy its sweet perfume, and when his worn and weary feet could feel the delicious refreshment which it gave.

We have not to read between the lines to find the lesson. After one dies--there is no lack of alabaster boxes to be brought from their hiding-places and unsealed. The kindest words are spoken then. Not a voice of fault-finding is heard in the darkened room where the dead form reposes in silence. A thousand pleasant things are said. A gentle charity covers and hides all his mistakes, and even his follies and sins. His life is talked over, and memory is busy gathering out the beautiful things he has done, the self-denials he has made, and the kindnesses he has wrought for the poor along the years of his life. Everyone that knew him, comes and looks on his pale face and says some generous word about him, recalling some favor received from his hands or some noble deed wrought by him. Near friends go to the florist and order flowers, woven into crosses, harps, pillars or crowns--to be sent with their card and laid upon his coffin.

There is nothing wrong in all this. Flowers on the coffin are beautiful. When a Christian sleeps, there they are fit symbols of the hope in which he rests. Then they seem to whisper sweet secrets of comfort for sorrowing hearts. They tell, too, of kindly feelings and gentle remembrances outside the darkened homes, while hearts are breaking within. They are the tokens of love and respect for the dead. There can be nothing inappropriate in the placing of a few choice flowers upon a coffin, or on the bosom of the dead.

It is fitting, too, that kind words should be spoken--even when the ear cannot hear them, or the heart be warmed and thrilled by them. There is no richer tribute to a human life, than the sincere witness of sorrowing friends around the coffin and the grave. It is natural that many a tender sleeping memory should be awakened at the touch of death. It is natural that when we have lost our friends, all the sealed vases of affection should be broken open to anoint them for the last time. It is well that even death has power to stop the tongue of detraction, to subdue enmities, jealousies and emulations, to reveal the hitherto unappreciated beauties and excellences of a man's character, to cover with the veil of charity--his blemishes and faults, and to thaw out the tender thoughts, the laggard gratitude and the long-slumbering kindly feelings in the hearts of his neighbors and friends.

But meantime there is a great host of weary men and women toiling through life toward the grave--who sorely need just now the cheering words and helpful ministries which we can give. The incense is gathering to scatter about their coffins--but why should it not be scattered in their paths today? The kind words are lying in men's hearts unexpressed, and trembling on their tongues unvoiced, which will be spoken by and by when these weary ones are dead--but why should they not be spoken now, when they are needed so much, and when their accents would be so pleasing and grateful?

Many a good man goes through life plain, plodding, living obscurely--yet living a true, honest, Christian life, making many a self-denial to serve others, doing many a quiet kindness to his neighbors and friends--who scarcely ever hears a word of thanks, or cheer, or generous commendation. He may hear many criticisms and many expressions of disparagement--but no approving words come to his ears. If his friends have pleasant things to say about him, they so manage to speak them--that he will not hear them. Perhaps they are not uttered at all. Those he loves and toils for, may be grateful--but their gratitude lies in their hearts like fruit-buds in the branches in February. The vases filled with kindly appreciation are kept sealed! The flowers are not cut from the stem.

You stand by his coffin, and there are enough kind things said there, to have brightened every hour of his life--if they had been said at the right time, while he was still alive. There are enough flowers piled upon his casket--to have kept his chamber filled with fragrance through all his years--if they had only been wisely scattered in daily clusters. How his heavy heart would have leaped and thanked God--if he could have heard some of the expressions of affection and approval in the midst of life's painful strifes, and when staggering under its burdens, which are now wasted on ears that hear them not! How much happier his life would have been, and how much more useful, if he had known, amid his disappointments and anxieties--that he had so many generous friends who held him so dear! But, poor man! he had to die that the appreciation might express itself! Then he could not hear the gentle words spoken over his cold form! The flowers sent and strewn on his coffin--had no fragrance for him. The love blossomed out too late.

Many a woman gives out her life for Christ in lowly, self-denying ministries. She turns away from ease and comfort and toils for the poor. With her own fingers, she makes garments for the widow and orphan. When she is dead--there is great mourning. The poor rise up and call her blessed. Those she has clad, gather about her coffin and show the coats and garments she made for them while she was alive. Her pastor

preaches her funeral sermon with wondrous tenderness and eloquence. All very well. It is a sweet reward, a beautiful ending, for such a life. But would it not have been better--if part at least of that kindness, had been shown to her while her weary feet were walking on their long love-errands, and her busy fingers were drawing the needle through seam after seam?

A husband piled most elaborate floral offerings about his wife's coffin, built a magnificent monument over her grave, and spoke in glowing eulogy of her noble sacrifices. But it was whispered that he had not been the kindest of husbands to her while she lived. A daughter showed great sorrow at her mother's funeral, and could not say enough in commendation of her--but it was known that she had thrust many a thorn into her pillow, while she was living.

Is it not a better thing to seek to make the living happy--than to leave them to walk along dreary paths without sympathy, unhelpt, neglected, perhaps wronged--and then flood their coffins with sunshine? Many a man goes down under the pressure of life's hardship, and the weight of its burdens, never hearing the voice of human sympathy. What does it matter to him, when the agony is over and he lies dead--that friends come in throngs to lament his death and to utter his praises? May it not be that a fragment of the sympathy and appreciation wasted and unavailing now that he is dead--would have kept his heart bravely beating for many another year?

Do not, then, keep the alabaster boxes of your love and tenderness sealed up until your friends are dead! Fill their lives with sweetness. Speak approving, cheering words while their ears can hear them. The things you mean to say when they are gone--say before they go! The flowers you mean to send for their coffins--send to brighten and sweeten their homes before they leave them.

If a sermon helps you, it will do the preacher good to tell him of it. If the editor writes an article that you like, he can write a still better one next week if you send him a note of thanks. If a book you read is helpful, do you not owe it to the author to write him a word of acknowledgment? If you know a weary or neglected one or one overworked, would it not be such work as God's angels love to do--to seek to put a little brightness and cheer into his life, to manifest true sympathy with him, and to put into his trembling hand--the cup filled with the wine of human love?

I have always said--and I am sure I am speaking for thousands of weary, plodding toilers--that if my friends have vases laid away, filled with the perfumes of sympathy and affection, which they intend to break over my dead body--I would be glad if they would bring them out in some of my weary hours and open them, that I may be refreshed and cheered by them while I need them. I would rather have a coffin without a flower, and a funeral without a spoken eulogy--than a life without the sweetness of human tenderness and cheer! If we would fulfill our mission, we must anoint our friends beforehand for their burial. Post-mortem kindnesses does not cheer the burdened spirit. Tears falling on the icy brow--make poor and tardy atonement for coldness and neglect and cruel selfishness in long, struggling years. Appreciation when the heart is stilled in death--has no inspiration for the spirit. Justice comes too late--when it is only pronounced in the funeral eulogy. Flowers piled on the coffin--cast no fragrance backward over the weary days.

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