

Learning Our Lessons

by J.R. Miller

The sermon teaches that life is an ongoing educational journey where we learn essential spiritual lessons through the Bible, experiences, and the example of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 11:29, Philippians 4:11, Hebrews 12:11, James 1:2

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Learning from Life"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes that life is a continuous learning experience, where every moment serves as an opportunity for spiritual education. He explains that the Bible is our primary textbook, while the lives of godly individuals and our personal experiences serve as secondary sources of lessons. Miller highlights the importance of not just knowing the lessons but actively practicing them in our daily lives, as true learning comes from application. He encourages believers to seek Christ not only as a teacher but also as a savior, recognizing that spiritual growth requires persistent effort and reliance on divine grace. Ultimately, Miller reassures that every challenge and trial is a part of God's educational plan for our character development.

Transcript

We are all scholars at school. In our present life, we never get out of our classes; our real living lies on beyond the grave, and here in this world--all is education. We are at school not merely when we are bending over our Bibles, listening to sermons, reading good books or sitting at the feet of our teachers--but also when we are at our tasks, when we are in the midst of life's busy scenes, and when we are passing through experiences of difficulty and trial.

We have our school-books from which to learn our lessons; among these the Bible is first. It is a wonderful book. God is its author; its lessons are patterned from the heavenly life, which is the standard in all our earthly training. It contains all that we need to learn; its lessons, fully mastered, will bring us to heaven's gates.

There are also secondary text-books, in which Bible-lessons are set for us in different forms. In the lives of godly people about us, we have these lessons--not written out with ink on white paper--but transcribed in indelible letters on mystic life-pages. We see there the lessons--not in words merely, as commands for obedience, as rules for action, or as heavenly patterns for earthly attainment--but brought down out of the skies and wrought into actual life!

In providence, too, we have another secondary text-book; in this God gives us special lessons. Here, oftentimes, he compels us to learn the things we do not want to learn. Here the school is disciplinary; our Father so deals with us as to subdue our willfulness, to check our waywardness, to quell our rebelliousness, to correct our ideas of life, and to cleanse our hearts of the poison of sin that lurks in them! Many times this part of our school-experience is painful--but its results are full of blessing.

In life itself--we have a "practice-school;" the things we learn from our text-books, we there try to get into our life. For example, our morning lesson is the duty of patience. We understand quite clearly, as we bend over the Bible-page, what the lesson means and what it requires us to do. Then with prayer for grace--we shut the book and go out into the world to take up our tasks and to meet the experiences of the day.

On all sides people's lives touch ours--not always sympathetically, sometimes in such a way as would naturally disturb us, arouse antagonism in us, provoke us to anger, or at least ruffle our calm. Now comes in our morning lesson on patience. The learning of it in mere words, was a simple enough matter--but probably we shall find that it is not so simple a matter to practice it. It is much easier to get a text of Scripture fastened in our memory--than to get the lesson of the text wrought into our life! Nevertheless, there the lesson stands, confronting our eyes all the day.

Part of our day's task is to apply this lesson, allowing it to hold in check all the impulses toward impatience, which the passing experiences may stir within us. Our morning text is set to stand as a monitor over our dispositions, words and conduct--and its mission is to bring all our life to its lofty standard!

Or the lesson may be, "Love . . . seeks not her own." We look at it first merely as a rule, a principle, apart from its relation to our own life, and we give it our most hearty approval; it is Christlike, we say, to live so. Again, we go out amid the strifes, the ambitions, the clashings and the competitions of life, and begin our day. "We have learned our lesson; now we are to practice it! This we soon find is very hard. It is against nature; there is a law in our members--which at once begins to war against the new idea of love which as disciples of Christ we have taken into our heart. To obey our morning lesson, requires the putting of self under our feet, and self violently resists such humiliation. Still, there the lesson stands in shining letters, and it is our duty, as obedient and diligent scholars, to learn it--that is, to strive to get it wrought into our own life!

The same is true, whatever the lesson may be. It is one thing to memorize what the lessons are--and quite another thing to learn to live and practice them! Most of us acquire life's lessons very slowly. Some of us are dull scholars; some of us are careless, loving play better than school, not taking life seriously, not diligently applying ourselves to our lessons; some of us are willful and obstinate, indisposed to submit to our teachers and to the rules of the school.

Thus many of us come to the close of our school-days, without having learned much--certainly without having attained a large measure of that culture of character and that discipline of life which it is the end of all spiritual training to produce. We are not obedient to our heavenly visions. We know--but we do not practice. We learn our lessons in our minds--but fail oftentimes to live them.

All life-lessons are slowly learned. It is the work of years, to school our wayward wills--into uncomplaining submissiveness; our hard, proud, selfish hearts--into soft, gentle thoughts; and our harsh, chattering tongues--into sweet, quiet, graceful speech.

The natural process of spiritual growth is first the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear; and these developments require time. We cannot have blade, ear and full corn--bud, blossom and ripened fruit--all in one day! We must be content to learn slowly the great lessons of life.

Ofttimes, too, we have to repeat the same lesson over and over again. In one of Miss Havergal's suggestive poems, she illustrates this by the experience of a pupil who thought she knew her lesson well--but the teacher came and gravely though lovingly shook her head: the pupil was to repeat the same lesson again. This time it was mastered every word. We commend the faithfulness and the wisdom of the teacher, who will allow no pupil to pass any lesson that is not mastered. It is far truer kindness, also, to the pupil to insist that he shall take his lesson over again--rather than allow it to pass and to remain a leaf dropped out, a lesson not learned. So, when we do not have our lessons learned--God gives them to us again!

When we look at one who seems to have acquired all life's lessons, it is a great comfort to us who are so far behind him--to know that he began way down in the Master's school--and learned his lessons in just the same slow, painful way in which we have to learn them.

Thus Paul, referring to himself, said, "I have learned, in whatever state I am, therein to be content." The statement is remarkable, because such contentment is so rare even among Christian people. But there is one word in this bright record of spiritual attainment which has immeasurable comfort for us common mortals in our struggles after the same spirit. Paul says that he had learned to be content. "We know, then, that he was not always thus content; at the first he probably chafed amid discomforts, and had to learn his lesson as we have to learn ours. Contentment did not come naturally to him--any more than it does to ordinary Christians; it was not a special apostolic gift which came with his divine appointment to his sacred ministry. He learned to be contented. Probably it was no easy attainment for him, and was reached only through many a struggle, and through long and painful self-discipline.

Such a glimpse into the inner history of a saintly life, ought to have its encouragement for us. Life's great lessons cannot be learned by anyone, without persistent and patient effort--but they can be mastered by anyone who is in Christ's school--and who will be earnest, diligent and faithful. The paths that others have trodden before us--to honor and nobleness--are open also to our feet!

But the question comes up from a vast multitude of men and women who are dissatisfied with their attainments and long to grow better, "How can we get these beautiful lessons wrought into life?" We know very well, that we ought to be patient, sweet-tempered, unselfish, thoughtful and contented; but when we begin to reach after these qualities--we find them far away and unattainable! The bright stars in the sky seem scarcely farther beyond our reach, when we stand on one of earth's lofty peaks, than do the spiritual lessons set for us when we strive to get them into our life!

Nothing makes us more conscious of our fallen state--than our attempts to realize in ourselves, the beauty of Christ. We soon discover that moral perfection is inaccessible to any human climbing. We are like birds with broken wings--made to fly into the midst of the sky--but unable to do more than flutter along in the dirt. So the question recurs perpetually, "How can we ever master these lessons that are set for us? They are hard enough for angels; how, then, can fallen mortals ever learn them?"

At last we are compelled to confess that we can never learn them--except in Christ's school. He says, "Learn of Me--and you shall find rest unto your souls." There is a little prayer which recognizes and voices this helplessness of humanity in a most striking way. It is in these words: "Lord, take my heart--for I cannot

give it! And when you have it, oh keep it--for I cannot keep it for you; and save me in spite of myself, for Jesus Christ's sake." Each clause of the short prayer fits our hearts.

"Lord, take my heart--for I cannot give it." We want to give our heart to Christ--but we are conscious of something holding us down, so that we cannot press ourselves into Christ's hands. An old writer says, "Of what avail are wings, when we are fast bound by iron chains?" That is our picture--like an eagle, eager to fly away into the sky--but chained to a rock! Unless Christ takes us and lift us away, breaking our chains--we never can fly into his bosom!

"And when you have it, oh keep it--for I cannot keep it for you." Again it is the lament of every sincere Christian heart, that the prayer voices. Our life may be laid sweetly in Christ's bosom today--but unless he shall keep it, folding about it his own mighty arms--it will fall out again into darkness. We cannot keep our heart for Christ.

"And save me in spite of myself." Pitiably as is the confession of weakness in these words, we know well that if ever we are saved--it must be in spite of ourselves!

So we are brought to realize, that the lessons of Christian life can be learned only when we have Christ, not merely for a Teacher--but also for a Savior! We never can be Christlike, unless Christ shall lift us up by his grace. But by receiving Christ into our hearts, we enter the family of God on earth, and become heirs of glory. The first thing, therefore, in learning our lessons is to have Christ living in us; then our lives shall grow from within--into all moral loveliness.

Another secret in spiritual education, is to seek at once--to live every lesson we are taught! There is not a line of divine truth--which is not intended in some way to affect our lives. Too many of us are content to know the lesson, and then not do it! Divine truth is not given to us merely for information, to make us intellectually intelligent. The Bible is a book for action. It is designed to be a guide to us. A guide's duty is not to deliver lectures to tourists telling them of the richness and the picturesqueness of the country which lies beyond the hills, describing the path that leads to it, and vividly painting the beautiful scenery along the way. A guide's duty is to take his party along the path, leading them safely through all dangers, and conducting them at last into the beautiful country that their own eyes may see it. The Word of God is given to us--to be our guide; that is, every sentence of it is a call to us to move onward, away from some sin or danger or self-indulgence, to some fresh duty, some higher plane of living, some new holiness, some richer experience!

Every line of the Bible, therefore, is a lesson set for us--which we are to learn--not intellectually alone--but by doing what the lesson teaches. We can never really learn the words of Scripture, except by doing them.

For example, here is a music-book--a book with notes on a musical staff, and with words also which are meant to be sung to the notes. The man who asks me to buy this book--says that it will teach me music. I buy the book and take it home, and sit down in my quiet library to learn my lessons. I memorize all the explanations and definitions, until I can open the book at any tune and tell what the key is and what the notes are. Yet I have never opened my mouth to try to sing; I cannot even run a scale. Everyone knows that music is not learned in that way. The pupil must practice the notes; he must make the sounds indicated.

It is just so with the Bible. The only way to learn its lessons--is to do them. Merely discovering what our duties are--will not take us a step onward in Christian life! We can learn--only by doing. When the Christian

path has been pointed out to us--we must set our feet in it. When the song has been written out for us--we must sing it. When the land has been described to us--we must move forward and take possession of it. When the picture has been envisioned to us--we must paint it on the canvas of our soul. When the duty has been revealed to us--we must hasten to carry our whole soul into it.

We should take, also, the lessons of experience as we learn them, and carry them forward to enrich our life. It certainly is a profitless living, which gets nothing from its past. We should train ourselves to look honestly at our own past, and with unsparing fidelity to note the mistakes we have made--and the sins we have committed. Then, having discovered the errors and sins we have made--we should straightway formulate for ourselves the lessons which our experience is designed to teach, and instantly begin to live by the new wisdom thus acquired.

Our past is of use to us--only as it helps us make our future better. Its errors should be shunned, its mistakes avoided. It certainly is weak and poor living, unworthy of an immortal being--which gathers nothing from experience and goes on day after day and year after year, merely repeating the old routine of negligence and failure, with no progress, learning nothing, growing no gentler, no stronger, no braver, no more Christlike. Our lives should be like opening rosebuds, every day unfolding some new beauty. The Christ in us--should break through the crust of our outer life--as the lamplight pours through the porcelain shade, and appear more and more in our character, in our disposition, in our words and conduct.

The celebrated statue of Minerva which stood in the Acropolis at Athens, was renowned for its graceful beauty and its exquisite sculpture--but there was in it another feature which no close observer failed to notice. Deeply engraved in the buckle on the statue, was the image of Phidias, the sculptor; it was so deftly impressed that it could be effaced only by destroying the work of art itself. In like manner, in the life of every true Christian, is the image of Christ; it is so inwrought in the character, in the disposition, in the whole being, that it cannot be destroyed. It is toward the filling out of this likeness--that all Christian culture aims. All our lessons--are in growing Christlike. In any circumstances we need but to ask, "How would my Master act--if he were in my place?" and then strive to do what he would do!

Thus all of life is school to us. The lessons are set for us hour by hour. We think we are in this world to work, to achieve success, to accomplish something that will remain when we are gone. Really, however, we are not here to work--but to be trained. Everything in our life is educational and disciplinary. Duty is but lesson-practice; work is for development, more than for results; trial is for the testing and the strengthening of our powers; sorrow is for the purifying of our souls. Many times our lessons are hard--and our experiences are bitter; but if we are patient and faithful, we shall some day see that our Teacher never set us a wrong lesson, never required of us a needless self-denial, never called us to pass through an unblessed discipline, never corrected us--but for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness!

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