

Strength and Beauty

by J.R. Miller

The sermon emphasizes the importance of combining strength and beauty in every Christian life and character, and warns against the dangers of shallowness of life.

Scripture: Psalm 96:6, Proverbs 31:30, Matthew 5:16, Romans 8:28, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 4:8, Colossians 3:23-24, 1 John 3:2-3

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Strength and Beauty"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the intertwined nature of strength and beauty in a Christian's character, arguing that true nobility arises from the combination of both qualities. He illustrates that while strength alone can be harsh and beauty can be weak, the ideal Christian life embodies both, reflecting God's own nature. Miller encourages believers to strive for spiritual growth, recognizing that imperfections and struggles are part of the journey towards holiness and that true religion permeates every aspect of life. He reminds us that our efforts, even when flawed, are beautiful in God's eyes when motivated by love and faith. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a life that is both strong in faith and beautiful in character, serving as a blessing to others.

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"Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and beauty are in His sanctuary." Psalm 96:6

PREFACE

The favor with which the author's former volumes have been received, encourages him to send out another. In all these books, the aim is to interpret the spiritual teachings of the Bible in the language of common life--that men and women, in paths of duty and in the stress of struggle or sorrow--may more readily get the inspiration, cheer, comfort, and help which they need!

This volume has much in it that is elevating and encouraging. It aims not at making life easy for its readers--but rather at making them brave and strong to do their best. That is the truest help one can give to others, whether it be in personal friendship or in a book.

Strength and Beauty

We should never be content with any mark but the highest. To strive for that which is less than the best--is unworthy of a child of God. It is a great thing, also, to have a measure of definiteness in one's ideal. Merely to want to be godly--may be a very vague longing. It is better if we know just what godliness is--if we can analyze it and resolve it into two or three simple elements.

We read that "God is love." That is very beautiful. Love suggests all that is gracious, kindly, gentle, unselfish, merciful. But its meaning is so vast, that thinking of it is like looking into the sun! The light dazzles our eyes. We understand it better--when we study it in its elements.

So it is with the word "good." We wish to be good--but what does the word mean? What are some of the elements which make up goodness? Strength and beauty are such elements. Strength and beauty blend in all truly noble character. Strength alone is not always lovely; it may be stern, oppressive, unjust, cruel or selfish. Among animals, strength is not itself winning--it may be very unlovely, though strong. Beauty alone may not be pleasing, being weak, lacking in firmness and truth. There are plants that are lovely in their delicacy--but so frail as to be scarcely more than a dream, so fragile are they. But when the two qualities, strength and beauty, are united--we have a character which wins the approval of God and the commendation of men.

The Bible abounds in exhortations to be STRONG. God is represented as serenely strong, and those who would be like him must also be strong. Weakness is never commended. God is infinitely patient with the weak. It was said of Jesus that he would not break the bruised reed nor quench the smoking flax. In these words of inimitable beauty, Christ's sympathy with weakness is depicted. His whole life was in harmony with this representation. His gentleness was infinite. All weak and weary things found in him--a shelter, a friend.

One of the legends of the life of Jesus, tells of a day when he was walking beside the sea, when suddenly a seabird, driven by a storm that had been sweeping on the farther shore, came fluttering towards him, and, panting, fell on the sand at his feet and died. Then he took the bird and laid it in his hand and breathed on it--when lo! The bird fluttered a moment and then flew aloft, its life restored. It is only a legend, and yet it was just in this gentle way, that Jesus dealt always with human weakness and failure, which fled to him out of life's storms.

Yet his treatment of weakness was not that of compassion merely; he sought always to make the weak, strong. He was a physician, whose mission it was not merely to nurse the sick--but to heal them. He was not satisfied to pity the feeble and the broken; he sought also to bind up and restore--to breathe life into that which was dead. In his hands the bruised reed became whole again, waving as before in graceful beauty. As he breathed upon the smoking flax--the dying spark was fanned into a flame, and the lamp burned brightly once more.

Weakness was not beautiful to the eye of Christ; it was something imperfect, faulty, lacking. It was something, too, which he sought to bring back to its true, normal state. He came not to destroy--but to fulfill, that is to fill full. He rejected nothing because it was in ruin; he sought to build up the ruin, into a temple of beauty. In most wonderful way, was this the mission of Jesus Christ. He came to a lost world--to be its Savior. He came to make the weak--strong; the soiled--white and clean; the outcast--children of God.

Thus, always, the work of Christ on human lives is towards strength. While he is infinitely gentle with weakness--it is not his desire that it shall remain weakness; he would build it up into strength. We have but to recall the character of his work upon his own disciples, to find illustration of this. What were they--when he first found them? Unlettered fishermen, ignorant, full of faults, dull and slow learners, stumbling continually. What were they--when they had been in his school for three years? Men of marvelous power, who turned the world upside down by their preaching. He made their weakness--strength.

The object of all spiritual culture is the same: to take feeble little ones--and train them into heroes of faith. It is never Christ's desire that we shall remain feeble. We begin as children--but we are to grow. The work of the Church, is the perfecting of the saints that we may all attain unto full grown men, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. God wants us to be strong.

The work of redemption is restoration. Nothing incomplete is yet perfect. There may be much that is lovely, in what is still imperfect--but the best is yet to be seen. Strength is the divine ideal for every life, that towards which divine grace is ever leading us. In the new life, the risen life, when perfected, there will be no trace of infirmity or feebleness. "It is sown in weakness--it is raised in power." Angels in heaven are strong--and we shall be as the angels. Those who always have been captives of infirmity--will be released from all weakness and weariness, and will become strong in the holy strength of God.

BEAUTY is another quality of character, which is everywhere commended in the Scriptures. Grace is beauty. God is beautiful. An Old Testament prayer runs, "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us." Psalm 90:17. We read of strength and beauty in God's sanctuary. Paul enjoins that, among other qualities, "whatsoever things are lovely" shall be in the vision of life into which we aim to fashion our character.

Humanity was made to be beautiful. God's ideal for man was spotless loveliness--man was made at first, in God's image. But sin has left its foul trail everywhere. We see something of its debasement, wherever we go. What ruins sin has wrought!

Christ was infinitely compassionate with the sinner. We remember how he went down even among the outcast, like one searching for pearls. Respectable people sneered at his interest in the fallen--as if he were himself like them. Never was there a sinner so low--that Jesus would not sit down beside him and be his friend.

But it was not because sin was beautiful to him--the smallest sin was loathsome, a terrible blot in his sight! Yet he was infinitely compassionate towards the worst sinner, because he knew that the sinner might yet become a child of God. He went among the lost, not because he preferred the company of the lost--but because he would save them. He brought from these quests--many a trophy, many a gem that has been shining in his crown ever since! He found one of his apostles among outcast publicans, and the name of Matthew is bright now with heavenly radiance. All Christ's work of grace--is towards the restoration in human souls of beauty of the Lord. He sees in the rough block the imprisoned angel--and seeks to set him free.

This world is full of marvelous beauty. Everything in nature is lovely. When heaven is described, the words that are used are those which suggest the most dazzling and radiant splendor. The streets are paved with gold, the walls are built of precious stones, the gates are great pearls, the sea is of glass, the light is the transfiguration glory of Christ. This is the home of man that is to be--saved, restored, perfected man.

All the precepts of the Bible are towards the fashioning of beauty in every redeemed life. We are to put away all that is sinful, all marring, every blot and blemish, every unholy desire, feeling and affection, everything that would defile--and put on whatsoever is lovely and Christ-like. The one great work of Christ in Christian lives--is the fashioning of holiness in them. We are to grow away from our deformities, our faults and infirmities, our poor, dwarfed, stunted life--into spiritual beauty. The mark set before us is the likeness of Christ, which, at last, we shall attain. "We know that when He appears--we will be like Him because we will see Him as He is! And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself just as He is pure." 1 John 3:2-3. "Worship the Lord in the beauty of His holiness; tremble before Him, all the earth!"

Psalm 96:9

Strength and beauty are not incompatible; they are compliments of each other. Perfect strength is always beautiful; and perfect beauty is always strong. In every Christian life and character, the two qualities should be combined. Yet not always is it so. We find sometimes the sturdy elements--integrity, justice, courage--without the beauty of grace and tenderness. Then sometimes we find the gentle qualities--sympathy, love, compassion, kindness--without the rugged virtues which are so necessary in a complete character. In both cases there is a lack. Neither strength nor beauty without the other, is complete; each is but a fragment. Only when the two are united--is the life really Christ-like.

Spiritual beauty is holiness. Nothing unclean is lovely. Character is Christ-like only when it is both strong and beautiful.

Sometimes there is a tendency to exalt the gentle qualities--but, if there is not strength as well, the life can only be wrecked in the world's temptations. The key to all noble character is masterly self control. Not to be master of one's self, is to be a captive. "He that has no rule over his own spirit--is like a city that is broken down, and without walls," wrote the wise man.

The life that is complete in God's sight--must be a life rich in blessing to others. Uselessness never can be pleasing to the Master. Jesus said much about fruit- fruitfulness is the test of a life. Neither the strength nor the beauty of a seed, is in itself. Imagine an acorn, which has been picked up by someone, carried into a beautiful room and laid on the mantel piece, congratulating itself on its escape from the usual fate of acorns--falling into the ground to be buried away in the darkness. Imagine it saying: "How fortunate I am! Here I have a warm home in a dry and cheerful place. I lie in this quiet room all day and people see my beauty. How I pity other acorns which have to stay out in the cold and rain and sink away into the muddy earth!" Yet we know well that this acorn's lot, is by no means enviable. It is kept dry and safe--but it never can reach God's thought, for it in this way. Only when it gives itself away to die in the earth, does it become either truly beautiful or strong. Then it grows into a majestic oak, whose strength defies the wildest storms, and whose beauty wins the admiration of all who behold it.

No human life can ever truly please God--by saving itself, by keeping itself from self-denial and sacrifice. No matter how magnificent its natural powers, nor how graceful its form and its accomplishments, it has neither strength nor beauty in heaven's sight--until it has devoted itself to service of love. It must die--to live.

All this is but following in the footsteps of our Master. He had all strength, and was altogether lovely. Yet, according to the world's standards, his visage was marred and his life was a failure. We may not copy earth's patterns; it is better that we seek to be like him who was meek and lowly--but who yet was the strong Son of God. "Yes, He is altogether lovely! This is my Beloved, and this is my Friend!" Song of Songs 5:16

Shallow Lives

In one of our Lord's parables, he depicts different lives as different kinds of ground, or rather ground in different conditions. One kind he describes under the figure of thin soil, too thin to bring anything to ripeness or perfection. The soil may be rich enough in its quality--perhaps the very best in the field--but there is too little of it. It consists of only a thin layer, and then under it lies a hard rock. The seeds are cast into the soil, which receives them eagerly, and nourishes them into quick life, "immediately they sprang

up," all the more quickly "because they had no deepness of earth." For a little time they gave splendid promise of growth--but "when the sun was risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away."

We understand the illustration, so far as the literal meaning is concerned. There are patches of soil like this in many a farmer's field. The wheat shown there, is the first of all to spring up, laughing at the slower seed in other parts of the field. But the first hot day it withers, and that is the end of it!

It is our great Teacher himself who paints this picture for us, meaning us to get a spiritual lesson from it. He tells us plainly, also, what kind of people he has in mind--those who hear the word, at first receiving it with joy--but in whom the word, lacking root, does not abide, because it cannot bear the testing of this world, and soon droops and perishes.

That is, there are those who by reason of the thinness or shallowness of their life--do not furnish soil in which the good things of Christian principle and character can grow. They are not unreceptive, like the life depicted under the figure of the trodden road; they receive quickly and impulsively, the good teachings and holy influences which come to them. But they just as quickly let them go. Worthy intentions do not grow into fixed purposes. Impulses do not become principles. Good feelings do not ripen into fruits of noble character. Heavenly visions are not wrought into holy deeds. The green shoots lie withered and dead on the ground!

Shallowness of life is too common a fault. It is not a large proportion of beginnings of good, which grows into maturity. There are too many people who are always eager to accept any new truth that is brought to them--but who do nothing with it, make nothing of it, do not assimilate it in their life-- and therefore soon lose it. Many begin to build, and are not able to finish. Countless readers read part of the first volume of great books, and never get any farther. In certain popular schools and lecture courses, the first enrollment falls off fifty percent before the close. If all who begin to learn music or art persevered unto the end--how full the world would be of music and of beauty! If all fine beginnings of character ripened into perfection--how good we all would be!

One of the pictures of the crucifixion of Jesus shows the scene on Calvary, after the body had been taken down and laid away in the grave. All is quiet and still. The crowd is gone. No one is seen about the place. There are only the ghastly memorials of the terrible things which had happened during the day. Off to one side of the picture is seen a donkey, nibbling at some withered palms that lay there. Thus the artist most graphically teaches the fickleness of human applause. Only a few days before--a great throng had followed Jesus over Olivet into the city in triumphant procession, waving their palm branches and strewing them on the road before him--as they shouted their hosannas. Now Jesus is dead, crucified, and here, near by the cross, lie those faded reminders of that glad day's rejoicing--nothing more.

So fickle was men's love for Jesus in those days, and so quickly did their hosannas change to shouts of derision! But is it different today? Do not men's hearts grow warm and tender with love for Christ on Sunday, in a service of devotion--and then by Monday lose all their glad, spiritual enthusiasm? The palm branches of praise and consecration, the green leaves of good resolves and eager intentions, lie withered on the ground, amid the tokens of unfaithfulness and disloyalty.

We hear stirring appeals to duty, and our hearts respond gladly and ardently. We think that we have become altogether Christ's, that our life henceforth will be devoted to him without stint or reserve. But, alas! The soil is thin. The green shoots find no place to root, and under the first hot sun they wither. What

comes of all our good intentions, our fair promises, our sacred pledges, our solemn vows? Too often nothing but faded leaves. We mean to live grandly--in the glow of our devotions we sincerely intend to be apostolic in our zeal and in the beauty of our character and work; but in the end nothing but pitiful failure comes of it all.

On every church roll, there are the names of those who began well, with unusual promise, and for a little time maintained the high standard of their auspicious beginning--but by and by, in the stress and pressure of duty and responsibility, or in the face of opposition and ridicule, they lost interest and soon fell out of the ranks altogether. In every city and town, there are thousands of lapsed church members. Once they were active and enthusiastic in following Christ--but they wearied in well doing--and no longer even claim to be Christians.

Nor is it in religion only, that this failure appears; we see illustrations of like fickleness in all departments of life. We see it in work, in business, in friendship, in education. Men are so impatient to get into active life, to be doing good, to be making money, to be shining as lights in the world--that they will not take time for adequate and thorough preparation. What in other men requires ten years--they try to crowd into three or four. They will spend no time in laying deep foundations; they are in such haste to see the superstructure of their dreams rising. They will not give years to apprenticeship--life is too short, they say, for such slow processes, at least for them; and they are out in the world long before the slow, plodding companions of their earlier youth. They form friendships almost at sight, and in a few days or weeks--make intimacies which in people of different mold require months or years. The seed springs up immediately.

But the end is the same in all cases. The eager student who had not patience to make thorough preparation for his profession, finds himself at length facing tasks which he cannot perform, and is a failure. The man who in youth spurned the drudgery required to learn a trade or a business--at mid-life or earlier discovers that he can do nothing well, and that there is no place for him in the world's crowded ways. He is pushed out of the ranks, therefore, not because men are hard or unkind--but because he cannot hold his place and do his work.

The friendships that sprang up in a day and at once became so ardent prove short lived, and leave only emptiness and sorrow behind. Few other causes are productive of so many failures in life--as thinness, superficiality. Noble possibilities perish, because there is no depth of soil in which heavenly plants can root themselves. The trouble is not with the native endowment--that may be princely; it is with the culture, the training. With depth of soil the harvest would have yielded a hundredfold; but by reason of its shallowness, there is no harvest at all.

We need to give serious thought to the warning against shallowness of life. The farmer's remedy is shovels and rakes, and the breaking up and removal of the rock. Then, in the deepened soil--the seeds will grow, taking firm root and coming to perfection. We should seek the deepening of our spiritual life--so that the words of God may find entrance, and may grow into a harvest of beauty. "It is bad to be hard--but it is bad also to be thin." No price we may have to pay, should be thought too great if the result is the development of all the possibilities there are in our life.

We cannot miss sore testing. Every life will have its trials. Our Lord in his explanation of the parable, says that when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, the man with the shallow life stumbles immediately. He cannot stand in the battle. The plants of righteousness growing in him have no deep root, and cannot endure the summer's heat.

In these modern days when Christianity is so widely in favor, and when persecution is rare--we may think that such testing will not be experienced. But never have there been days which more sorely tried believers in Christ, than do our own very days. Persecution is not the only trial which tests faith. It is harder to live nobly--than to die heroically. It may be easy now to profess Christ--but it is not easy to live the true Christ-like life year after year. Prosperity is oftentimes sorer testing than adversity. Many a man who could endure the hardness of war as a good soldier--fails utterly in the days of peace. Luxury slays more, both bodies and souls, than poverty. Only the plant that has deep root--can live through heat and drought.

We must provide for both summer heats and winter storms--if we would be ready to stand all the tests of life. We may be tried by sorest assaults of tempter, or by the most gentle fascinations of unsuspected evil. We must be ready for either. The only preparation that will avail, is a faith fixed upon Christ, a life rooted in him, a purpose which no tempest of temptation can shake. The winds and storms make the well-rooted tree stand all the more firmly.

So it is with the Christian life which is truly rooted in Christ. It has its temptations, its trials, its struggles--but they only strengthen it, making it cleave to Christ the more closely and firmly, and grow into all the more beautiful character. But if our faith is feeble; if our religion is one of feeling only instead of principle; if we are ruled by the emotions instead of by the power of an inner life--then we shall not be able to endure the storms, and shall faint and fall under their sweep and strain!

Crowding Out the Best

Some lives come to nothing--because they take in too many interests. They are too crowded. One thing chokes out another, and, of course, it is always the best that is choked out. In one of our Lord's parables, he illustrates the mistake of this kind of living--by a bit of soil in which the good seed sown in it failed, because there was too much else growing in the same piece of ground. The soil itself was good, as good as the best. The seed was of excellent quality, the same that in another part of the field yielded a hundredfold. When it was first sown it began to grow and gave fine promise. But it soon became apparent that the soil was preoccupied. The roots of thorn bushes had been left in the ground, and when the wheat began to grow--the thorns shot up too, and they grew so rapidly and so rankly--that they crowded out the wheat, overshadowing it, drinking up the nourishment from the soil, so that nothing came in the end from the good seed which started so hopefully.

It is interesting to read our Lord's interpretation of this part of his parable. The thorns, he says, are the cares, riches, and pleasures of this world. These things stay in the life where the good seed has been planted, and so fill the ground, that they absorb the life's strength and interest, and are so aggressive that they crowd out the gentler growths.

It is easy to understand how this can be. We all know how it is, in a garden that is not well tended. The weeds spring up and choke out the flowers and vegetables. Weeding is a very important part of a gardener's duty. The ground must be kept clean. Our hearts are like gardens. We plant the seeds--but the weeds were in the soil first, and they spring up at once, or even before our seeds have had time to send up their tender shoots. At once the battle begins. If the weeds are let alone--they will soon have full possession, and all our gardening will be a failure.

Cares are thorns or weeds. Cares are worries, anxieties, and distractions. They seem to grow as naturally in a heart--as weeds do in a garden, or thorns in a field. Some people think worries are quite harmless. They never think of them as sins. But Jesus spoke very strongly against worry. He said we should never

worry. It does no good. It grieves our Father for it shows distrust of his love and goodness. It is following the example of the heathen, who do not know of the Father's love for his children. Then here Jesus says worries choke out the good which he is seeking to get to grow in us.

We should guard against worry--just as we guard against any and every sinful thing. We should pick it out whenever it shows its ugly head--just as the good gardener watches for weeds and takes out every one that comes up. We have an illustration of the danger of worry--in the story of Martha. There were many good things growing in her life--but they were all well-near choked out by the worry that she allowed to grow up in her heart. Many other people have the same danger. Life's anxieties crowd out the beautiful things which start in their hearts, and which will grow only in a free and clean soil. Worry is thus a most harmful habit. We should weed it out of our life--and let God's peace possess us. If we do not--it will sorely crowd out and choke to death, the good things growing in us. Then there really is no need of anxiety. If we will be true to God and trust him--he will keep us always in perfect peace.

Things to Leave Undone

Some things must be left out; just what they shall be--is the question. Many hands beckon continually. We can follow the beck of only one; which shall it be? There are thousands of books standing up in their place in the library, each one crying, "Read me!" But one is all we can read today; which shall it be? Every morning, we think of many things we would like to do and might do--visits of courtesy and kindness, perhaps of helpfulness or sympathy, we might pay; affairs of business; matters of pleasure or self-improvement, we might attend to--but we cannot, with our limitations of time and strength--do one in ten of all these possible things. Which of them shall we do? There is a duty of neglecting, of leaving undone--as well as a duty of faithfulness and diligence in doing.

How shall we know what things not to do? Is there any law of selection, any principle which should guide us in deciding what we should leave undone among the many things that invite us?

We may set it down as a first rule, that the duties which belong to our common vocation or employment, should always have the precedence. We must not neglect these, however urgent other calls may be. If a boy is in school--his school tasks must receive his thought and occupy his time--to the exclusion of every other occupation, until they have been mastered. If a young man is in a business position of any kind--the duties of his position must be attended to with punctuality, promptness, and fidelity, before he has a minute for anything else. No matter how many outside interests may appeal to his sympathy or his desire, nor how eager he may be to respond to the appeals--he has no right to listen to one of them, until he is free from the allotted tasks of the day.

If a young woman is a teacher in a school, her engagement binds her to perform the duties of her position during certain hours of five days every week, for a definite number of months in the year. There may come to her many opportunities of doing other things. Poor people may need care and help which she could give them. Sick neighbors may require visiting and watching with through long nights, and her heart may prompt her to undertake this ministry of mercy. Mission work may appeal for helpers and she may be eager to enter it, may almost feel that she dare not refuse to do so. It would be easy for her to be always going somewhere on some good errand, filling every moment of her time with work aside from her school duties.

But this young woman will make a serious mistake, if she thinks that it is her duty to do all these good and beautiful things which make their appeal to her sympathetic heart. Her first thing, that to which God has

called her for the time, at least, that which she has covenanted to do, and for which she has been sacredly set apart--is her work as a teacher. Not only is she to devote the regular school hours to her specific duties as teacher--but, besides, she must give all the time necessary for conscientious and careful preparation for her tasks, so as to do them well, and also must secure such measures of rest as will fit her for her duties. All this work is hers by divine allotment, by divine commandment, and if she turns aside to any other task, though it is a religious service--she is robbing God. Everything else that offers must be resolutely neglected until this work has been done well enough to present to her Master.

This teaching is very important. It matters not what one's regular calling may be--the commonest daily work, or the most lowly office, or the highest duty of earth--whatever it is, it must always be the first in one's thought and in the occupation of one's time.

There must be no skimping of one's daily task. Even a prayer meeting is not so sacred--as one's ordinary duty which fills the same hour, and it will not be right to go to the prayer meeting, when in doing so tasks for that hour are left undone.

Sometimes good people get wrong opinions on this subject. They suppose that because it is a religious service or some holy task that invites, they may be excused for neglecting a common secular duty or for being late for some engagement. There have been men who failed utterly, bringing ruin upon themselves and their families, because they neglected their duties in running to prayer meetings or looking after what they called religious interests. There have been women whose homes suffered, and whose children were left uncared for, while they were attending conventions, or looking after some social or religious affair outside. They have made themselves believe that the importance of such outside services was so great, that even the holiest duties of motherhood and wifehood might be passed by--in order that these other things should be done.

But this is a sad misreading of the divine law. It should be set down as an invariable and inexorable rule, that general appeals to interest and sympathy are to be denied until one's own sacred work has been faithfully done. Nothing is so binding upon us--as the duty we have engaged to do. No work is so sacred to us as our own, that which comes to us in our place, which no other can do for us.

After all this duty has been performed with conscientious fidelity--then we may think of doing the other things which we may find to do. Still the question wait, "What shall we do--and what shall we neglect?" There is room always for wise choosing--we cannot do all that we might find to do. There is a vast difference in the value and importance of the various opportunities or appeals which come to us--and we should choose to do those things which bring the greatest good to others, or leave the deepest permanent result.

Many of the things which we might do--are not worth while to do. No good would come to the world, from our doing of them. It is well for a busy man to have a ministry, something profitable to which he turns, when his day at the duties of his vocation is ended--but he should make sure that it is a ministry which will prove a benefit not to himself only--but to others as well. If we are to give account for every idle word--we must also give account for every idle hour spent in any useless occupation. Sometimes the most sacred use of leisure hour is rest; or bright, cheerful recreation, to fit one for the serious tasks and duties which wait on the morrow.

But we should always remember that we have a duty of not doing, and that many calls for our time and strength must be firmly declined. Not every open door opens to a duty. The tempter opens doors, too, and

we are to resist all his solicitations. Then there are calls which are not to sinful things--but to things that are worthless. There even come to all of us, appeals for ministrations of mercy and kindness which are not to be regarded, because prior duties fill the hands that would quickly turn to these new services if they were empty. There are first things which must never be neglected nor displaced, though a thousand appeals clamor for our attention.

When Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness," he did not mean merely prayer meetings, sick calls, and social visits--he meant the great duties and occupations which belong in each day. For most of us, these fill our waking hours. What we shall do in our leisure time--we shall learn if we are ready always to follow the Master's leading.

It need not even be said, that all wrong and sinful things should be left undone. Part of the confession we must make every day, is that we have done things which we ought not to have done. There is need for more tenderness of conscience, more careful searching of heart, that we may put out of our life firmly and remorselessly everything which ought not to be there. We are too easily satisfied with low attainments. We are fond of saying that no one can live perfectly, that, do the best we can--we sin every day.

There is a story of a good woman who said she found a great deal of comfort in the doctrine of total depravity. We seem to find a great deal of comfort in this teaching, that everyone has faults and failings. It makes a fine, broad cloak which covers many shortcomings. The result is in too many cases that we live on altogether too low a plane. As good orthodox Christians, we have the privilege of denying that perfection is possible, and we self-indulgently make altogether too little effort to reach the unattainable goal.

We are too tolerant of our own failures and sins! We are not so tolerant of the failings and sins of others. We hold our neighbors to a very rigid account. We make small allowance for their infirmities, and for the sharpness of their temptations. We set a high standard for them--and expect them to reach it. It would be more Christ-like if we would reverse this course, showing charity to others in their weakness and failure--and being intolerant of fault and shortcomings in ourselves! No discovered sin, should ever be allowed to remain for an hour; to give it hospitality is disloyalty to Christ and to truth. We should keep before us continually the highest ideal, the perfect life of Christ himself, that in the beauty and whiteness of his faultless character, we may ever detect the flaws in ourselves and be stimulated toward whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are lovely.

Thus, too, our standard will ever be advancing, so that what satisfies us today--will not satisfy us a year hence. We shall see, each new day, something hitherto tolerated, perhaps loved and cherished, which must be given up and left out. Paul gives us certain lists of traits, qualities, and habits belonging to the "old man," which he exhorts us to put off in the culture of the new life.

A true life ever reaches upward and strives toward better things. It leaves behind the things that are imperfect, as it presses toward perfection. It puts away childish things, as it grows toward manhood. It leaves undone the things that are not right or beautiful, the things that are not essential--and gives all its energy to the attaining and achieving of the things that are excellent, the things that belong to the imperishable and eternal life.

Its Fruit in Its Season

Every life is sent into this world--to be a blessing. God's thought for every creature he makes, is beauty and usefulness. The marring and the curse, we find everywhere are not divine purposes--but come from the resistance or the perversion of the holy will. The word "sin" means missing the mark; anything or any person that fails to be beautiful or to be a blessing--has missed the mark.

The Bible makes it plain, that fruit is the test of the Christian life. Jesus made this very clear, by saying that the branch in the vine which bears no fruit--is taken away, cut off, and cast out to be burned. It is useless, and there is no room on the great vine for any useless branch or twig. Jesus said also that the fruitful branch is pruned, that it may bring forth yet more fruit. That is, even ordinary fruitfulness does not quite satisfy the husbandman; he wants every branch to do its best, and therefore he applies a system of culture which will insure increasing fruitfulness. Jesus made it clear that no one can be his follower in truth--who is not willing to be a luxuriant fruit bearer: "Herein is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit; so shall you be my disciples." We cannot be his disciples, if we do not bear much fruit. All the culture of the Christian life, is toward fruitfulness.

What is fruitfulness in the spiritual sense? It is more than Christian activities. There are many people who are active in Christian duty, faithful, diligent, energetic--who yet do not bear in their own life and character, the fruits of the Spirit. There are some people who are ever busy in doing good, whose lives are useful and full of helpfulness for others, who yet lack the graces of the finest and best spiritual culture. Paul enumerates among the fruits of the Spirit, "love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance."

No doubt true fruitfulness ordinarily includes Christian activities. We are to go about doing good, as our Master did. It is necessary in order to the best life--that we should use our gifts and talents in all possible forms of helpfulness, to make the world better, and to give comfort, strength, or cheer to other lives. At the same time it is essential for truest faithfulness, that the life shall also bear the fruits of the Spirit. Martha was intensely active in her serving--but she lacked at least one of the qualities which belong to true fruitfulness--the quiet of God in her heart.

What is the purpose of fruit? It is not merely for ornament or decoration. The fruit of trees--is for the feeding of men's hunger. The same test should be applied to Christian life. It is not enough to bear fruit merely for the adornment of our character, or the beautifying of our own life. Fruit for fruit's sake, is not the motto. We are to do all things for the glory of God. The glory of God, however, embraces also the good of others. The commandments of love to God and love to our neighbor, are linked together in one. He who loves God--will love his neighbor also. Therefore it is no sufficient motive in fruit bearing, that it is for the honoring of God's name. We cannot honor God's name, except by living for others. Hence we must bear fruit which will be a blessing to others, which will feed the hunger of human hearts.

It is one of the best tests of our life--that others are helped, cheered, strengthened, or comforted by the things in us, which are beautiful and good. There are some people whose lives are blessings wherever they go. The peace, joy, and love of their hearts--make others happier and better.

One of the old legends tells of the visits of a goddess to ancient Thebes, and relates that the people always knew when she had been there, although no eye saw her--by the blessings she left behind. She would pause before a deadened tree, and the tree would be covered with beautiful vines. She would sit down to rest upon a decaying log, and the decay would be hidden under lovely moss. When she stepped on the muddy shores of the sea, violets would spring up in her tracks. This is only a legend--but it

illustrates the influence of the beautiful life in which the fruits of the Spirit have full and rich growth. There are lives so full of grace and goodness, that every influence they give forth is toward cheer and hope and purity.

On the other hand, there are lives whose every breath is malevolent. Another ancient legend tells of a maiden that was sent to Alexander from some conquered province. She was very beautiful--but the most remarkable thing about her was her breath, which was like the perfume of richest flowers. It was soon discovered, however, that she had lived all her life amid poison, breathing it, and that her body was full of poison. Flowers given to her, withered on her breast. Insects on which she breathed, perished. A beautiful bird was brought into her room, and fell dead. Fanciful as this story is, there are lives which in a moral sense, are just like this maiden. They have become so corrupt, that everything they touch, receives harming. Nothing beautiful can live in their presence.

On the other hand, the Christian life is one whose warm atmosphere is a perpetual blessing. It is like the shadow of Peter, having healing power--so that all on whom it falls, are enriched and blessed by it.

In one of the Psalms, a godly life is compared to a tree planted by the streams of water. The emblem is very suggestive. A tree is not only one of the most beautiful objects in nature--but also one of the most useful.

It must be noted that each tree brings forth its own fruit. There is widest variety among trees; so also is there in Christian lives. No two are the same. It is not wise for us to try to copy the mode of fruitfulness of some other person. Imitation is one of the most common faults in Christian living. One man lives helpfully in his own way--and hundreds take him as their pattern. Thus they lose their own individuality and mar both their character and their work. The true way is to get full of Christ--and simply be one's self. No tree tries to bear fruit like some other tree; each one bears its own fruit--and that is best for it. Each life, too, should yield its own fruit. It may not be such fine fruit as another life bears--but it is the finest which that life was made to produce, and therefore is its best. Much of our strength lies in our individuality.

Another feature of this tree, is that it brings forth fruit in its season. Different kinds of fruits, ripen at different times of the year. Some come early in the summer, some late. There are those Christians who bring forth lovely fruits even in childhood, whose lives are tender, thoughtful, unselfish, and true. But ordinarily we must not look for the fruits of ripened experience, in youth time. Young Christians should not be expected to be just like older Christians. Naturalness is one of the charms of any beautiful life.

We must not look for the ripeness of mature life--in those still in the youth time of experience. It is a fruit tree that is in the psalmist's mind. This tree brings forth its fruit in its season. There are weeks and weeks in which the fruit hangs upon the tree, and though it has all the semblance of lusciousness, it is still hard and sour. By and by, in the time of ripening, all is changed, and the fruit is mellow and sweet! It is so in life. Many excellent people, with much promise of fruit, do not bring their fruit to perfection until the late autumn of life. Paul was an old man, when he wrote that he had learned in whosoever state he was, therein to be content.

This language intimates also that the great lesson was hard to learn. Contentment did not come naturally to him. It took him many years, well into old age--to grow into the sweet spirit. Young people, therefore, should not be discouraged if they cannot now have all the graces of gentleness, thoughtfulness, patience, and unselfishness which they see and admire so much in those who are older. The tree brings forth its fruit--in its season. If only they abide in Christ, receiving from him the blessings of his love and grace--they

will bring forth the ripe fruit in their season.

Some fruits do not ripen until the frosts come. Just so, some Christian lives do not yield their richest and best character, until the frosts of sorrow have fallen upon them. Many Christians go on through joyous days, amid prosperity, pure in motive, earnest in activity--yet not bringing forth the best fruits. By and by trouble comes, adversity, sorrow, loss; and under the keen frosts--the fruit is ripened. After that, they have a sweeter spirit, with more love for Christ, with deeper spirituality and a larger measure of consecration.

If we would bear fruit, there is a condition we must observe--we must abide in Christ. The roots of our life must go down deep into his life--as the roots of the tree penetrate the earth's soil. We must live so that the blessings of God's love shall reach us--through our faith and through the Word and Spirit of God. No Christian can be fruitful, who does not receive from Christ, through the Holy Spirit, the divine grace and blessing. The tree must be planted--by the streams of water.

True Religion

There were two artists, close friends, one of who excelled in landscape painting, and the other depicting the human body. The former had painted a picture in which wood and rock and sky were combined in the artist's best manner. But the picture remained unsold--no one cared to buy it. It lacked something. The artist's friend came and said, "Let me take your painting." A few days later he brought it back. He had added a lovely human figure to the matchless landscape. Soon the picture was sold. It had lacked the interest of life.

There are some people whose religion seems to have a similar lack. It is very beautiful, faultless in its creed and its worship--but it lacks the human element. It is only landscape, and it needs life to make it complete. No religion is realizing its true mission--unless it touches life at its every point.

It seems to be the thought of many--that the religion of Christ is only for a little corner of their life. They fence off the Sabbath and try to make it holy by itself--while they devote the other days to secular life, without much effort to make them holy. In like manner, they have certain exercises of devotion each day, which they regard as religious--but which also they shut off in little closets, so that the noise from the great world outside cannot break in to disturb the quiet. These they regard as holy moments--but they do not think of the other long hours of the day as in any sense sacred.

That is, they try to get the religion of their life into little sections by itself, as if all God wants of his children is a certain amount of formal worship--in between the periods of business, struggle, care, and pleasure.

But this is an altogether mistaken thought, of the meaning of Christian life. True religion is not something which is merely to have its own little place among the occupations of our days, something separate from and having no relation to the other things we are doing. Religion that can thus be put into a corner of its own, large or small, and kept there, in holy isolation--is not true religion at all. It was said of Jesus in his life among the people--that he could not be hidden. This is always true of Christ, wherever he is. He cannot be hidden in any heart--he will soon reveal himself in the outer life.

The figures which are used in the Scriptures to illustrate divine grace, all suggest its pervasive quality. It is compared to leaven, which, hid in the heart of the dough--works its way out through the lump, until the whole mass is leavened. It is compared to a seed, which, though hid in the earth, and seeming to die--yet cannot be kept beneath the ground--but comes up in the form of a tree or a plant, and grows into strength

and beauty. It is compared to light, which cannot be confined--but presses its way out into the world, until all the space surrounding it is brightened. It is called life--and life cannot be kept in a corner. Indeed, grace is life--a fragment of the life of God let down from heaven and making a lodgment in a human heart, where it grows until it fills all the being.

All the illustrations of the kingdom of heaven in this world, represent it as a branch of that kingdom, so to speak, set up in a man's heart. "The kingdom of heaven is within you," said the Master. It is not something that grows up by a man, alongside the man's natural life, and apart from it--it is a new principle that is brought into his life, whose function it is to infuse itself into all parts of his nature, permeating all his being, expelling whatever is not beautiful or worthy, and itself becoming the man's real life. "Christ lives in me," said Paul, "and that life which I now live in the flesh--I live in faith."

From all this, it is evident that the object of grace in a life is not merely to make one day in seven a holy day, and to hallow a few moments of each morning and evening--but to absorb and fill the man's whole nature. The Sabbath has served its true purpose, only when it has spread its calm and quiet through all the other days. We worship God, especially on that one day--in order to gather strength and grace to live for God in the six days that follow. It is not worship for worship's own sake, that we are to render--but worship to get more of God down into our life to prepare us for duty and struggle, for burden-bearing and toil, for service and sorrow.

It has been said by a distinguished English preacher, that direct worship is a small part of life, and that every human office needs to be made holy. True religion will manifest itself in every phase of life. We sit down in the quiet and read our Bible--and get our lesson. We know it now--but we have not as yet got it into our life--which is the thing we have really to do.

Knowing that we should love our enemies--is not the ultimate thing--actually loving our enemies is. Knowing that we should be patient is not all--we are to practice the lesson of patience until it has become a habit in our life.

Knowing that we should always submit our will to God's, is to have a clear mental conception of our duty in this regard; but this is not true religion. There are many who know well this cardinal duty of Christian life--who yet continue to chafe whenever they cannot have their own way, and who struggle and resist and refuse to submit to the divine will, whenever it appears to be opposed to their own will. They know their lesson--but they have not learned to live it. It is living it, however, that is true religion.

Even the best of striving, will not get all the heavenly vision wrought into life. It is not possible that we with our clumsy hands, can ever put into act or word or carve into visible beauty--all that we dream when we kneel before Christ, or ponder his words. None of us live any day as we meant to live, when we set out in the morning.

Yet it is to be the aim of our striving--always to live our religion--to get the love of our heart, wrought out in a blessed ministry of kindness. Christ lives in us; and it is ours to manifest the life of Christ in our daily living.

It is evident therefore, that it is in the experiences of weekday life, far more than in the quiet of the Sunday worship and the closet, that the real tests of religion come. It is easy to assent with our mind to the commandments, when we sit in the church, enjoying the services. But the assent of the life itself can be obtained, only when we are out in the midst of temptation and duty, in contact with men. There it is, alone,

that we can get the commandments wrought into ways of obedience and lines of character. And this is the final object of all Christian teaching and worship--the transforming of our life into the beauty of Christ!

In modern days, the thought of Christianity has been greatly widened. It is no longer supposed, by most Christians at least, that its sphere is confined to a small section of life. We claim all things now for Christ. Our belief is that the whole world belongs to our King. We claim heathen lands for him, and we are pushing the conquest into the heart of every country. We claim all occupations and trades, and all lines of activity for him. The vocation of the minister of the gospel, is in one sense no more holy than that of the carpenter or the merchant. We all are living unto the Lord, whatever we are doing, just as much in working at a trade as in preaching, and on Monday as on Sunday. Religion claims all our common life, and insists on dominating it. It asserts its power over the body, which is holy because it is the temple of the Holy Spirit.

In one of Paul's letters is this counsel: "Let each man abide in that condition wherein he was called." This would seem to teach that, as a rule, men are not to change their vocation when they acknowledge Christ as their Master--but are to be Christians where they are. The business man is not to become a minister, that he may serve Christ better--but is to serve him by being a Christian business man. The artist, when he accepts Christ, is to remain an artist, using his brush to honor Christ. The singer is to sing--but is to sing now for Christ, using her voice to start songs, in this world of sorrow and sin. They are most like Christ--who go everywhere in his name.

Enough has been said to show that religion is not meant to be merely an adjunct of life--but is to enter into the life itself, and to change it all into the quality of the life of Christ. We come together in our church services to give God something, to worship him; but we come also and chiefly to receive something from God, to have our strength renewed, our spirit quickened, that we may go out into the world to live more righteously and to be greater blessings to others.

Peter wished to make three tabernacles on the Mount of Transfiguration and to hold the blessed heavenly vision there. But his wish was a mistaken one. There was a ministry of love which the Master himself had yet to perform. At the foot of the mountain, at that very hour, a poor boy was waiting to be freed from demonic possession. A little farther on, Gethsemane and Calvary were waiting for Jesus. Think what the world would have lost of blessing--if Peter's prayer had been answered, if Jesus had remained on the mount! Then, for Peter himself, and his companions, service was waiting. Think, also, what a loss it would have been if these apostles had not come down from the Transfiguration mount, to do the work which they afterwards did!

Hours of ecstasy are granted us here--to fit us for richer life and better service for Christ and our fellow men. We pray, and read our Bible, and sit at the Lord's Table--that we may get new grace from God to prepare us for being God's messengers to the world, and new gifts to carry in our hands to hearts that hunger.

The Beauty of the Imperfect

Most of us fret over our faults and failures. Our imperfections discourage us. Our defeats oftentimes break our spirit and cause us to give up. But this is not true living. When we look at it in the right way, we see that the experiences which have been so disheartening to us, really contain in them elements of hope and encouragement.

There is beauty in imperfection. Perhaps we have not thought of it--but the imperfect in a godly life--is really the perfect in an incomplete state. It is a stage of progress, a phase of development. It is the picture--before the artist has finished it. It is beautiful, therefore, in its time and place.

A blossom is beautiful, although compared with the ripe, luscious fruit, whose prophecy it carries in its heart--it seems very imperfect. The young shoot is graceful in its form and wins admiration, although it is but the beginning of the great tree which by and by it will become. A child--is not a man. How feeble is infancy! Its powers are undeveloped, its faculties are untrained--it is yet without wisdom, without skill, without strength, without ability to do anything valiant or noble. It is a very imperfect man. Yet who blames a child for its incompleteness, its immaturity, its imperfectness? There is beauty in its imperfection.

We are all children of greater or lesser growth. Our lives are incomplete, undeveloped. But if we are living as we should, there is real moral beauty in our imperfectness. It is a natural and necessary process, in the unfolding of the perfect.

A child's work in school may be very faulty, and yet be beautiful and full of encouragement and hope, because it shows faithful endeavor and worth improvement.

A writing teacher praises his scholars, as he inspects the page they have written. He tells them, or certain of them, that they have done excellently. You look at their work, however, and you find it very faulty indeed, the writing stiff and irregular, the letters crudely formed, and you cannot understand why the teacher should speak so approvingly of the scholars' work. Yet he sees real beauty in it because, when compared with yesterday's page, it shows marked improvement.

So it is in all learning. The child actually walked three steps alone today--and the mother is delighted with her baby's achievement. These were its first steps. A little girl sits at the piano and plays through the simplest exercise with only a few mistakes, and all the family are enthusiastic in their praise of the performance. As music it was most meager and faulty. If the older sister, after ten years of music lessons and practice, were able to play no better than the child has done--there would have been disappointment, and no commendation. The imperfect playing was beautiful because, belonging in the early stages of the child's learning--it gave evidence of faithful study and practice.

A mother found her boy trying to draw. Very crude were the attempts--but to her quick eye and eager heart, the figures were beautiful. They had in them the prophecies of the child's future, and the mother stooped and kissed him in her gladness, praising his work. Compared with the artist's masterpiece when the boy had reached his prime--these rough sketches had no loveliness whatever. But they were beautiful in their time, as the boy's first efforts.

The same is true of all faithful efforts to learn how to live. We may follow Christ very imperfectly, stumbling at every step, realizing but in the smallest measure, the qualities of ideal discipleship; yet if we are doing our best, and are continually striving toward whatsoever things are lovely--our efforts and attainments are beautiful in the eye of the Master, and pleasing to him.

In the New Testament, a distinction is made between perfection and blamelessness. We are to be presented faultless at the end, before the presence of the divine glory--but even here, with all our imperfection, we are exhorted to live so as to be unblamable. That is, we are to do our best, living sincerely and unprovably. Then as Christ looks upon us--he is pleased. He notes many faults, and our best work is full of mistakes--but he sees beauty in all the imperfection, because we are striving to please

him--and are reaching toward perfection.

There is a home of wealth and splendor in which the most sacred and precious household treasure, is a piece of puckered sewing. A little child one day picked up the mother's work--some simple thing she had been making and had laid down--and after a half hour's quiet, brought it to the mother and gave it to her, saying, "Mamma, I's been helping you, 'cause I love you so." The stitches were long, and the sewing was drawn and puckered. But the mother saw only beauty in it all, for it told of the child's love and eagerness to help her and please her. That night the little one sickened, and in a few hours was dead! No wonder the mother calls that little piece of puckered sewing, one of her rarest treasures. Nothing that the most skillful hands have wrought, nothing of greatest value among all her household possessions, means to her half so much as that piece of spoiled stitching by her child.

May not this be something like the way in which God looks at his children's humblest efforts to do things for him? We are well aware how faulty even the best Christian work done in this world must seem to our Master--how full of unwisdom, of unbeauty, how foolish much of it, how mixed with self and vanity, how untactful, how indiscreet, how without prayer and love, how ignorant, how ungentle. But he does not chide us for it, does not blame us for doing so imperfectly, the sacred things he gives us to do. No doubt many of our poor blunders, our most faulty pieces of work, are held among our Master's most sacred, most cherished treasures in heaven!

Then he uses our blundering efforts, if only love and faith are in them, to bless others, to do good, to build up his kingdom. Christ is saving the world today, not through faultless work of perfect angels--but through the poor, ignorant, flawed, oftentimes very tactless, foolish work of disciples who love him and want to help him!

Take another phase of the same truth. We usually think of defeat as dishonorable. Sometimes it is. It is dishonorable when it comes through cowardice or lack of effort. We ought to train ourselves to be overcomers. But when one has bravely done his best and after all, has gone down in the struggle, there is no disgrace in his failure.

A twofold battle is going on whenever a man is fighting with hard conditions or adverse circumstances, and it is possible for him to fail in one and be victorious in the other. Too often a man succeeds in his battle with the world--at the cost of truth and right. That is defeat indeed, over whose dishonor heaven grieves. But when a man fails in his struggle with circumstances, and yet comes out with his virtue untarnished, he is a conqueror indeed and his victory gives joy to the heart of Christ! Such failure as this is, in heaven's sight, glorious success and no dishonoring of the life!

Defeat is the school in which most of us have to be trained. In all kinds of work, men learn by making mistakes. The successful business man did not begin with success. He learned by experience and the experience was very costly. The true science of living--is not to make no mistakes--but not to repeat one's mistakes. Defeat when one has done one's best, and when one takes a lesson from his defeat, is not something to be ashamed of--but something to be glad for, since it sets one's feet on a little higher plane. Defeat which makes us wiser and better--is a blessing to us.

An old man said that in reviewing his life he discovered to his great surprise, that the best things in his character and in his career, were the fruits of what he regarded as his failures and follies. These defeats had wrought in him new wisdom, and had led to repenting and renewals of faith in God, and had thus proved sources of richest blessing and good. Probably the same is true in greater or less degree, of every

life. We owe more to our defeats, with the humbling of the old nature, the cle

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