

The Wider Life

by J.R. Miller

The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a life of breadth and fullness, and encourages listeners to enlarge the place of their tent by serving others and overcoming narrowness.

Scripture: Isaiah 54:2, Matthew 5:16, John 10:10, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Galatians 6:9, Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 4:8, Colossians 3:23-24, 2 Peter 1:5-8

Topics: "Christian Living", "Personal Growth"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the call to 'enlarge the place of your tent' from Isaiah 54:2, urging believers to reject a narrow life and strive for fullness in all aspects of existence. He argues that Christianity does not limit personal growth or intellectual pursuits but rather encourages the development of every capacity, excluding only what is sinful. Miller illustrates that true enrichment comes from within, as he shares stories of individuals who overcame their circumstances by expanding their hearts and minds. He encourages Christians to serve others, as this act of love can lead to personal transformation and a broader life experience. Ultimately, he asserts that life should continually expand, even into old age, as we strive to reach God's highest ideals for us.

Transcript

"ENLARGE the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes!" Isaiah 54:2

We should never be content with a narrow life. We are made for breadth and fullness, and we rob God when we fail to reach our best. Some people assert that Christianity's ideal for life, is narrow. They say it cramps and limits us. It has no place, for example, for physical or intellectual development. It says nothing about art, music, science, or the many phases of human activity. It presents only the moral side--conscience, obedience to heavenly laws, spiritual attainments and achievements.

The answer is that while Christianity may not definitely name the things of the intellect, or distinctly call men to noble achievements in art, in exploration, in invention, in research, in the culture of the beautiful, it really includes in its range everything that will add to the fullness and completeness of life and character. It excludes nothing but what is sinful: disobedience to law, impurity, selfishness, uncharity, and these only narrow and debase, do not broaden and enrich life. It includes "whatever things are true, whatever things are honorable, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report." Is this a narrow life?

Our Christian faith places no limitation whatever on life--except what would mar, blot, or debase the character. Japanese horticulturists have a trick of stunting trees, and the world is full also of stunted men, only dwarfs of what God made them to be. But the call of Christianity is always for whole men--men reaching up to their best, and out to their broadest in every way. The Chinese bind the feet, some nations mutilate the face, others repress and crush the feelings, affections, and desires--but Christianity seeks the fullest development of every power and capacity of the being. Jesus Christ, our pattern, would have us become full-grown men. As leaders of others, as teachers, as followers of Christ--our influence should be toward the enriching and broadening of lives.

A recent book is dedicated to a distinguished scholar and teacher, who is designated as an enlarger of human lives. There is no way in which we can prove ourselves better friends to others--than by such influence over them as will make their lives fuller, truer, more loving, more helpful.

There are many people whose lives are small. They never grow into strength and beauty. It is said that Michael Angelo once paid a visit to the studio of Raphael, when the artist was absent. On an easel there was a canvas with the outline of a human figure, beautiful--but too small.

Michael Angelo took a brush and wrote under the figure the word "larger". The same word might be written under many lives. They may be good and beautiful--but they are too small. They need to be enlarged. They have not sufficient height or breadth. They do not realize God's highest ideal for them. They do not mean enough in the world.

There are many people who live in only one room, so to speak. They are intended to live in a large house, with many rooms, rooms of the mind, rooms of the heart, rooms of taste, imagination, sentiment, feeling. But these upper rooms are left unused, while they live in the basement!

A story is told of a Scotch nobleman who, when he came into possession of his estates, set about providing better houses for his people, who were living huddled together in single-roomed cottages. So he built for them pretty, comfortable houses. But in a short time each family was living, as before, in one room, and letting out the rest of the house.

They did not know how to live in larger, better ways. The experiment satisfied him, that people could not be really benefited by anything done for them merely from the outside. The only true way to help them, is from within, in their minds and hearts.

Horace Bushnell put it in an epigram, "The soul of improvement, is the improvement of the soul." It is not a larger house that is needed for a man--but a larger man in the house! A man is not made larger by giving him more money, better furniture, finer pictures, richer carpets, an expensive automobile--but by giving him knowledge, wisdom, good principles, strength of character; by teaching him love.

A missionary took with him to some northern region a vine, which he planted. During the short summer it was put outside, and in the winter it was kept indoors. For ten years it lived--but grew only three feet and never put forth a blossom. The missionary was then sent to a southern climate and transplanted the vine. There it grew rapidly and bore much fruit. There are people who live in a chill atmosphere, and their lives amount to almost nothing. If we can give them summer warmth--their lives will expand into beauty and fruitfulness.

Some lives are narrow, by reason of the way their circumstances have dwarfed them. We may not say, however, that poverty necessarily has this effect, for many who are poor, who have to live in a little house, with few comforts and no luxuries--live a life that is large and free--as wide as the sky in its gladness; while on the other hand there are those who have everything of an earthly sort that heart could desire--yet whose lives are narrow.

There are some people to whom life has been so heavy a burden--that they are ready to drop by the way. They pray for health, and instead illness comes with its suffering and its expense. Their work is hard. They have to live in continual discomfort. Their associations are uncongenial. There seems no hope of relief. When they awake in the morning, their first consciousness is of the load they must take up and begin again to carry. Their disheartenment has continued so long, that it has grown into hopelessness. The message to such is, "ENLARGE the place of your tent." No matter how many or how great are the reasons for discouragement, a Christian should not let bitterness enter his heart and blind his eyes--so that he cannot see the blue sky and the shining stars.

Looked at from an earthly view-point, could any life have been more narrow in its condition than Christ's? Think who he was--the Son of God, sinless, holy, loving, infinitely gentle of heart. Then think of the life into which he came--the relentless hate that was about him, the bitter enmity that pursued him, the rejection of love that met him at every step. Think of the failure of his mission, as it seemed, and his betrayal and death. Yet he was never discouraged. He never grew bitter.

How did he overcome the narrowness? The secret was love. The world hated him--but he loved on. His own received him not, rejected him--but his heart changed not toward them. Love saved him from being embittered by the narrowness. This is the one and the only secret that will save any life from the narrowing influence of the most distressing circumstances. Widen your tent! Make room in it for Christ and for your neighbor; and as you make place for enlargement, the enlargement will come.

There was a woman who had become embittered by a long experience of sickness and of injustice and wrong, until she was shut up in a prison of hopelessness. Then, by reason of the death of a relative, a little motherless child was brought to her door. The door was opened most reluctantly, at first; the child was not warmly welcomed. Yet when she was received, Christ entered with her, and at once the dreary home began to grow brighter. The narrowness began to be enlarged. Other human needs came and were not turned away. In blessing others, the woman was blessed herself. Today there is no happier home than hers. Try it if you are discouraged. Begin to serve those who need your love and ministry. Encourage some other disheartened one--and your own discouragement will pass away. Brighten another's lonely lot--and your own will be brightened.

Some lives are made narrow by their limitations in opportunity. Some men seem not to have the same chance that others have. They may be physically incapacitated for holding their place in the march of life. Or they may have failed in business after many years of hard toil--and may lack the courage to begin again. They may have been hurt by folly or sin--and do not seem able to take the upward flights they used to take. There are some people in every community who, for one cause or another, do not seem to have a chance to make much of their life. But whatever it may be that shuts one in a narrow environment, as in a little tent, the gospel of Christ brings a message of hope and cheer. Its call ever is, "ENLARGE the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes!"

There is danger that some of us overdo our contentment. We regard as an impassable wall, certain obstacles and hindrances which God meant to be to us only inspirers of courage. Difficulties are not intended to stop our efforts--but to arouse us to our best. We give up too easily. We conclude that we cannot do certain things, and think we are submitting to God's will--in giving up without trying to overcome, when in fact we are only showing our indolence. We suppose that our limitations are part of God's plan for us, and that we have only to accept them and make the best of them.

In some cases this is true--there are barriers that are impassable; but in many cases God wants us to gain the victory over the limitations. His call is, "Enlarge the place of your tent!"

Hard conditions do not necessarily make a life a failure. "What do you raise here, from these rocks?" asked a traveler in New England. "We raise men!" was the answer. If there can be no physical victory over physical handicaps, there can be always at least a moral victory. We should never accept any hindrance, that shuts our soul in any prison. Our spirit may be free--though our physical life is shut up in a prison of circumstances.

An English writer tells of two birds, caught and put into cages side by side. One of them, a starling, began to resist and struggle, flying against the wires of its cage in vain efforts to escape. The other, a canary, quietly accepted its captivity, and, flying up on the perch, began to sing, filling all the place about with glad songs.

The former bird was a captive indeed, shut up in a narrow, hopeless prison. The other turned its captivity into widest liberty and its narrow cage into a palace of victory. We say the starling acted very foolishly, and that the canary showed true wisdom. Which course do we take when we find ourselves shut up in any narrow, imprisoned life?

Life should never cease to widen. People talk about the "dead line"--it used to be fifty years of age; now it probably is under that. After crossing that line, they tell us, a man cannot do his best. It is not true--at least it should not be true. A man ought to be at his best during the last years of his life. He ought always to be enlarging the place of his tent--until its curtains are finally pushed out into the limitless spaces of immortality!

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/jr-miller/the-wider-life/>

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