

The Cross and the Will of God (Continued)

by L.E. Maxwell

The sermon emphasizes the importance of self-discipline in Christian living, highlighting the connection between discipline and discipleship.

Scripture: Matthew 16:24, Luke 9:23, Romans 7:15, 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Galatians 5:24, Philippians 4:13, 2 Timothy 2:3-4, Titus 2:11-12, Hebrews 12:1-2, 1 Peter 5:8

Topics: "Discipline", "Sacrifice"

Description

L.E. Maxwell emphasizes the profound impact of self-discipline and sacrifice through the life of Mathilde Wrede, who dedicated herself to serving prisoners in Finland, embodying the essence of living for God's will. He illustrates that true Christian discipline is essential for spiritual leadership and effective ministry, drawing parallels between military discipline and the Christian life. Maxwell argues that without the Cross, our efforts are futile, and that a life of prayer and service requires a deep relationship with Christ, which empowers us to endure hardships. He challenges believers to rise above complacency and embrace the rigorous demands of discipleship, likening the Christian journey to a soldier's preparation for battle. Ultimately, he calls for a commitment to self-denial and discipline, urging Christians to be fit for the fight of faith.

Transcript

MATHILDE WREDE was a baroness, the daughter of a provincial governor in Finland--an educated, cultured, and gifted musician. In her teens she was taken by the Cross and became Christ's captive. She literally spent herself for the prisoners of Finland. In her own home "she lived on the same fare as the prisoner in prison, and they knew it. Such were the contrasts in this life--related by birth to the highest breeding and by choice to the greatest need." Dr. Ernest Gordon says, regarding the place of affection she held in the hearts of Finnish prisoners, that "idolized" would be a lean word. "One convict invited her to his home and slept on the floor before her door like a dog so that she should not be disturbed in any way." Dr. Gordon further says regarding her tireless ministry and self-disciplined life:

When, after a night of insomnia, she felt a certain reluctance to take up her daily task, she would say, to herself encouragingly, "Today I have again the privilege of being occupied with my Father's business." Then while going down the stairway, she would continue, "O my poor body! How tired you are! We are now going to try again to get a-going. Up to now you have shown yourself obedient and patient when love spurred you to work. I thank you. I know that today you will not leave me in the lurch."

What an emancipation! What a redemption! And what is it to be redeemed, if we be not liberated from the lesser, the lower, the lustful? God help us if Christian victory can make us no "better than our bodies' inclinations." Thrice happy are those liberated, light-hearted, carefree souls who can almost teasingly encourage their fatigued frames as could Mathilde Wrede. Such a merry heart doeth good like a medicine. Has the reader leaned on the flesh, been subject to it, attached? And then it has let you down? It is only that you may find the hidden, secret gold of self-discipline. Seek for her as for hidden treasure.

There are those who may wonder and sigh over such a standard. To you it is nebulous and unattainable. It is true that, until one has come to an end of all strength and purpose and resolution of the flesh, every attempt to practice such self-discipline will lead us to either fortify ourselves in self-righteousness or to the quagmire of Paul's, "What I would I do not" (Romans 7). The flesh must be dealt with first and always at the Cross. Let us illustrate. After Andrew Murray had spoken earnestly upon prayer he received a letter from a noted and devoted minister in which he wrote: "As far as I am concerned, it does not seem to help me to hear too much about the life of prayer, the strenuous exertion, the time and trouble and endless effort it will cost us. These things discourage me. I have time after time put them to the test, and the result has always been sadly disappointing." Mr. Murray replied: "I think I have never mentioned exertion and struggle, because I am so entirely convinced that our efforts are futile, unless we first learn to abide in Christ by a simple faith." This minister also added: "The message I need is this: 'See that your relationship to your living Saviour is what it ought to be. Live in His presence, rejoice in His love, rest in Him.'" Mr. Murray assured this minister he was quite right, but that, if his relationship to the living Saviour was what it ought to be, it would certainly make possible a successful life of prayer. But we cannot live in the flesh and pray in the Spirit.

Prayerlessness is symptomatic of a life lived in the flesh, a lack of life in the Spirit. It takes life, the life of the Cross, to replace the death-damp of the flesh. This book is being written for that purpose--that we may have the power and ability, as well as desire, to live and to pray and to preach according to God's blessed will.

Only those who understand a measure of the emancipation of the Cross have any thirst for the subject in hand. But the anointed of the Lord, those chosen for spiritual leadership, can no more escape the sword of self-discipline than the field the plow, or the vine the pruning knife. "Pervading all nature," said Herbert Spencer, "we may see at work a stern Discipline, which is a little CRUEL, that it may be very KIND."

There is scarcely a thrill comparable to that of witnessing a disciplined military commander lead his men into the thick of battle. Such a man can lead them where he could never drive them. Those who lead others must themselves be disciplined. It is said that in World War I a well-preserved official "tried to persuade the Arabian leader Faisal (afterward king of Iraq) to undertake the impossible; he said that it would end the war at once if Feisal made his men climb about the precipitous country like goats and tear up the railway" (Amy Carmichael in Kohila). As Feisal looked at this fellow's "six feet of comfortable body," he asked him if he had ever tried to "goat himself." Those who would lead the Lord's battalions, whether as Sunday school teacher, preacher, or missionary must learn to "goat themselves" before they can say with Paul, "Ye became followers of us and of the Lord."

We perhaps little realize the solicitude of Our allied leaders, as they face the almost superhuman task of whipping into shape millions of soft civilian young men. In the early days of the war a noted secular writer said: "In my opinion, democracy will not survive unless it is prepared to impose upon itself a discipline as rigid as that which a dictator fixes on a totalitarian state." Our military men knew that the undisciplined,

untrained warrior had little or no chance against the disciplined men of the dictator-controlled countries. Their only hope lay in sufficient time to develop, and harden, and train our millions to match the already schooled, the disciplined, the fit. In the mercy of God that time was allowed us. Now and then a leader has lashed out against the enervating philosophies of our modern educational system. One such leading general in World War II, a man whose duty for the past years has been to transform civilians into soldiers, says:

We've had so-called high standards of living for the past generation--and one-third of our youth are unfit for military service. And many that pass our none-too-high physical standards for entrance into the Army require much time and patience to harden physically--even more time and patience to toughen morally. . . . The biggest job in the Army is to knock the complacency out of young officers and men, to make them realize that only by dint of their greatest effort, their utmost unselfishness, their infinite pains, and their capacity for self-sacrifice . . . will victory be attained. We must arouse in them the spirit of the offensive.

Do you know what these words really mean? Many of our young people, despite their high school and university educations, don't know until they have been in the Army among combat troops for months--greatest effort, utmost unselfishness, infinite pains, capacity for self-sacrifice.

It will be one of the greatest fortunes of the war if the discipline of the army can "knock the complacency out of us and make us realize "greatest effort, utmost unselfishness, infinite pains, capacity for self-sacrifice" for His sake.

How differently did the Spartan education develop the soldiery! The Greeks of old carried discipline to a point of almost unbelievable severity. Boys who were taken from their homes at seven, never again slept under their mothers' roofs. They were obliged to prepare their own meals, wear the same clothing summer and winter, sleep on a bed of rushes, and on festival days be publicly whipped to test their endurance. Some preferred to die under the lash rather than to cry out. All this was to produce what the Greek prized so highly--a perfect human specimen. Godet says:

The abstinence of the (Greek) athletes related not only to criminal enjoyment, but also to gratifications in themselves lawful; so the Christian's self-denial should bear, not only on guilty pleasures, but on every habit, on every enjoyment which, without being vicious, may involve a loss of time or a diminution of moral force.

Someone says, "What dupes we are of our own desires! Destiny has two ways of crushing us--by refusing our wishes and by fulfilling them. But he who only wills what God wills escapes both catastrophes. All things work together for his good."

It should be said of the hero of the Cross more truly than of Edward Wilson of the Antarctic: "The secret of his influence lay in a self-discipline that was as habitual as most men's habits are, an inner culture of mind and heart and will that gave his life a poise, so that he could not be untrue either to himself or his fellow men." Why do we dwell upon discipline? Because it can never be separated from discipleship. The Captain of our salvation lived one lifelong renunciation and self-chosen martyrdom.

Little wonder, then, that the supreme symbol for New Testament discipleship is that of good soldiery. The military note is struck everywhere. Paul speaks of running, racing, wrestling, soldiering, fighting. To him, life is continually a conflict, a contest, a struggle. To many, grace means, get off easy. But "the day of the grace of God that brings for us the discipline of renunciation" (Titus 2:11, 12 Arthur Way) we refuse. To be

"strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus," Paul says, is to "endure hardness as a good soldier."

When he would sting Timothy, the timid, and challenge him to "stir up the gift of God," he said: "For God gave us not a spirit of fearfulness; but of power and love and discipline" (11 Tim. 1:7, A.S.V.). Discipline--what an awful word! To this generation the very thought of it is like the sting of cold rain in the face. But true Christian discipline must be rescued from every false fear. While true discipline will never be easy on the flesh--"no man hath a velvet cross"--its main thought is to render us fit for a hard fight, to produce self-control, to stiffen our renewed wills that they may act according to divine principle.

True discipline enables us to choose the hard thing if only it will make us a better soldier for Christ. In one of Israel's national midnights, Gideon blew a pet blast. 32,000 responded. But 22,000 of these, the "fearful and fainthearted," slipped silently home. Only 10,000 remained, a courageous company. But courage is not enough. God has an eye to quality in selecting soldiers. God's men must be girt up. A Canadian bridge once collapsed, killing many workmen. The girders were not sufficiently strong to stand the downthrust and strain.

God Himself superintends the final sifting of Gideon's army. It is a simple but remarkable test. The remaining 10,000 are taken down to the water to & the insignificant thing of taking a drink. Of these, 9,700 drink to the full. Facing the foe and the stern reality of battle, they must still feel comfortable. All their lives they had lived in the realm of their feelings, indulgent and indifferent. They could not become soldiers overnight. They had never learned obedience, had not learned to live in their wills.

Although naturally courageous, their fleshly indulgence manifested unfitness for the fight of faith. Their feelings unfitted them for the fight. It is said that during the Boer war, when England was depressed and troubled, the government sent for Lord Roberts, and explaining the dark situation, asked if he would undertake the campaign. His quiet answer was, "Yes." Thinking he did not realize all the perils and problems, the chairman put the question again. Field Marshal Lord Roberts replied: "I have been training for this moment for twenty years." No soldier, whether for the king, or for the King of kings, is made in a day.

But how different the three hundred. They were self-disciplined, self-controlled spirits, eager for a fight, their whole system set on winning the battle. They catch a mouthful in the palm of the hand--and they are away. Gideon has his army, fit for the fight, self-disciplined as well as courageous. They had courage plus ordered lives. They were exposed to odds over-whelming. They had to stand the strain, not only of battle, but also of the ridiculous and the unreasonable. Behold a paltry three hundred with pitchers, and lamps, and rams' horns, against men like grasshoppers for multitude--135,000 of them.

God tests his soldiers in the unconscious moment. Our reaction when we are under no outward restraint is the final test of character. And character we must have to stand strain. Christ must have soldiers so girt that they can stand the weight, the sags, the down-thrusts of modern society. "Our Gideon is Christ," says D. M. Panton, "He walks up and down among the churches, watching us classify ourselves." Would we please Him who has chosen us to be good soldiers? Then we must not collapse and crumple up under tests. Many are called but few are chosen--because not choice.

We are engaged like Gideon in a midnight struggle. The darkness deepens. Dream not that it is day. The problem of discipline, then, becomes a very practical one and acute. The question is one of "reaction." How do we conduct ourselves amidst the providential? How can preferences and tastes, likes and dislikes, feelings and enjoyments enter into the drill of the soldier! Why dream on, in a "Pearl Harbor" of a

fool's paradise? Modern society is just that. The night is dark, but we may not be far from home. And remember that as a Christian soldier "one is forced to travel even at noon as if one were going to battle." Most Christians feel (O treacherous feelings!) that we are to be carried to the skies on flowery beds of ease, while others fight on to win their prize and sail through bloody seas.

When Napoleon addressed his troops in his Piedmont campaign, he said: "You have gained battles without cannon, passed rivers without bridges, performed forced marches without shoes, bivouacked without strong liquors, and often without bread. Thanks for your perseverances! But soldiers, you have done nothing--for there remains much to do.' By Calvary's blood and agony, by the crying need of millions; yea, by all the glories these unreached souls may miss, let us lay aside all pettiness, forget our paltry sacrifices, and cease our struggle.

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