

THE UNFINISHED TASK

"All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full." Ecclesiastes 1:7.

Life is a river. Like a river, it is always changing. Yet, in the midst of unceasing change, there is an abiding identity. Also, it is full of moods. It flows from the placid calm of one moment to the passionate turbulence of the next.

Emphasize that life is a river in the incompleteness of its work. "All the rivers run into the sea, yet the sea is not full." Take what period of time you will and consider its accomplishments. The thing that impresses you is the fragmentariness of your achievements. Life is a long record of partially fulfilled purposes. Our efforts are seldom found with the results for which we dared to hope. In every sphere of activity, our expectations are disappointed.

Restlessness reigns in the world. Peace is an ideal, but a fleeting one. Industrial and economic conditions pass from one state of turmoil to another. The course of business is everything but smooth. Tangle follows tangle. Our successes do not reach our anticipations. Our homes fall short of the duty we have in mind. The faults we fight in our lives are only partly vanquished. The virtues we cultivate are still in the green ear. Our lives have not won the laurels we might have. Many plans have been brought to fruition but have felt that we might have done better. A sense of the incomplete seems to belong to human life. We are always confronted with an unfinished task.

I. Things Which Account For The Unfinished Task.

1. We do not cling ardently enough to our high purposes.
2. We yield too easily to distraction.
3. We are tossed to and fro by the winds of sentiment.
4. We are too ready to emphasize obstacles and difficulties.
5. We are too willing to give up the fight.
6. We do not have sufficient strength.
7. The purpose which prompted it is superseded by another.
8. We neglect to make adequate preparation.

II. Failure or Success.

The higher one aims the more likely he is to fall short. You cannot fairly judge a man's life by taking into consideration only his failures. To put the proper estimate on a life one must know something of the quest in which that life has been spent. Some live in the realm of small things where success comes easily. But when it comes, it counts for little. The hypocrites gave alms to be seen of men, and it is said of them that "they have their reward." They sought for the glory of men and won it. What did it amount to? As your ideal mounts your failures will multiply. It is better to have striven for the stars and have only an upward look as a result than to have grovelled in the dust. The by-products of peace, character and joy are worth so much more.

We must not suppose that every finished task of life is a success. Many strive long and hard for a prize which is worthless and does not contribute to real happiness in life. We should measure success by the abiding satisfaction which is brought to life.

Neither is every unfinished task a failure. David planned to crown the list of his achievements with the erection of a beautiful temple. But he was destined to disappointment. God said, "Whereas it was in thy heart to build a house for My name, thou didst well that it was in thy heart." There is no ultimate failure for any plan which God approves. If it is not for us to put the finishing stroke of that plan into execution, it is counted to us for success that we conceived the plan and did our best to fulfill it.

III. The Effect of the Unfinished Task Upon You.

1. It need not discourage you.

If the purpose that inspired you to undertake it is worthy, your present defeat is only a step toward ultimate triumph. Beecher once said, "You are never so near to victory as when you are defeated in a good cause." The time when one needs to be careful is in a time of success. He is in the most dangerous position who has never known the sting of failure. The road that leads to real life is not the road of ease and luxury. If you are satisfied, in all probability, you have not asked enough of life. If your ideals are high enough your pathway will be marked with failure somewhere. Failures in the higher realms will be far greater successes than triumphs in the lower ones. Before you congratulate yourself on the success of an achievement, be sure that the plan which you entertained was the highest possible. If you are inclined to be discouraged by the task that lies unfinished, you should remember that work inspired by a good purpose can never fail.

2. It should challenge you.

(1) It is a challenge to discernment.

Pause frequently to consider the direction in which you are travelling. Ask yourself "Is this thing which I am striving for worth the time and energy that I am putting into it? Is it worth my further pursuit? Am I misspending my strength? Should I continue to seek to accomplish this?" To make sure your direction is right test it by the life of Christ. Human life finds its paragon in Him. His virtue and wisdom exceeded all others. Judging from His deeds, the secret of a happy, God-approved life is self-sacrificing service for the good of others. Experience and observation verify this. The most Christ-like life is the one most wholly consecrated to the good of others. Such a life can never fail.

(2) It is a challenge to fidelity.

Granting your course is right, can you maintain your loyalty? In the midst of distractions and temptations can you remain true to your purpose? Having formed noble resolutions, can you be relied upon to preserve their integrity? Can you plod courageously on and endure unto the end? This is a challenge to sustained fidelity.

(3) It is a challenge to faith.

If you bring a good work to perfection, you will need the uninterrupted support of faith, faith in your work, in your self, and in Christ. According to your faith it will be performed by you. Where faith is weak no mighty works are done. Where there is no faith Christ-like virtues shrivel, human distresses increase, and the powers of darkness triumph.

Your success tomorrow depends on your wise and unwearied pursuance of the unfinished task of yesterday. You must go on. Let failure be the flash-light that reveals the thing wherein you are weak; let it be the mirror to show you what manner of person you are. But never let it cause you to relinquish a high ideal. Failure is the ocean into which the rivers of life run and from which in turn they draw their never exhausted supply.

The sea is not full. But the rivers flow on and on. We are "passengers going through." As we go, let us make life a little brighter, more cheerful and easier for our fellow-men. God will never pronounce such a life a failure.