

ARE YOU FACING OR EVADING LIFE?

"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it" (Luke 9:24).

Ultimately, there are only two classes of people: the ones who master life and the ones who are mastered by the circumstances of life. There are those who develop inner resources so that in both bright and dark days they are able to stand and face life courageously. There are others who find life too difficult, so they are constantly running away from or evading it.

There are those who can say: "My spirit is free even though my life is bound. The way I react is within my power." There are others who give way to self-pity. They spend their days thinking of themselves and what happens to them, how life has dealt them a cruel blow, how it has been unjust and unfair. They are constantly tempted to retreat from life rather than to face it.

It is the business of the churches and the purpose of preaching to help increase the number of individuals who can face life and stand up to its problems, and to diminish the number of persons who are defeated by the circumstances of life. We need to help people to be what they ought to be, and to endure what they should not attempt to evade.

Life does not go smoothly for any of us all the time. All of us have moods of elation and periods of depression. All of us have blue Mondays, so to speak. If a person comes to understand that depression is an experience common to all, he may learn to take his hand off his emotional pulse and face his moods squarely instead of trying to escape.

There is a Negro spiritual that describes perfectly this common experience, namely, "Som'times I'm up; som'times I'm down, Oh, yes, Lord!" If we are honest with ourselves, we will have to admit that we have known times when we were on the heights, when life was interesting and full of joy, and that we have known days when we were in the depths, when life was a burden, a monotonous round of tasks which brought little satisfaction.

No man ever solves his problems by trying to evade them. One difficulty in running away is that we take ourselves along and we are our own greatest problem. Facing life instead of evading it requires objectivity. A man must learn to look at his life as he looks at the lives of other people. He must never yield to the temptation to evade, to retreat, to find excuses for things being as they are. If a man is to find the secret of life and experience happy, victorious living, he must be honest with himself. One may deceive a few people part of the time, but not as frequently as he thinks that he does, but he ought never to attempt to kid himself. We should be positive and firm in dealing with ourselves -- our purposes and motives.

Of Sophocles, the Greek poet, Matthew Arnold said: "He saw life steadily and saw it whole, but from no point of view." That is, he saw life all the time, he didn't run away, and he saw the whole of life: "the last for which the first was made." He did not see it as if the world revolved around him. He labored diligently to achieve objectivity.

The Scholastics of the Middle Ages had a Latin expression to describe this goal, *sub specie aeternitatis*, which means to take the point of view of God, to see life

"under the aspect of eternity." We may rise above ourselves and see life beyond the limitations of time and space in all of its fullness and meaning. When we do, if we have a sense of humor, we will be able to put ourselves in the proper perspective and not take ourselves too seriously. By some such process, it is possible for one to understand his life.

"To see life steadily and to see it whole" means to accept ourselves. That is the most difficult task a man ever has. We should accept ourselves as we are, not as we would like to think we are, not as we hope we appear to other people.

Four hundred years before the birth of Christ, Hippocrates divided the temperaments of mankind into four classes. Modern psychologists do not accept this classic division as final and complete, but admit that it is suggestive.

There is the phlegmatic type, slow and impassive. These are the people who keep plodding along and finally get the job done, but often do it without much enthusiasm. They can very easily become pessimists and wonder if the job is worth doing or will ever be completed.

There is the choleric type, quick, fiery, and passionate, who will do almost anything if it can be done today. Such people do not want to tackle any job that is going to have to go over until next week or even until tomorrow. They are often described as activists. A great many Americans seem to have this temperament.

There is the sanguine type, warm and cheerful, buoyant, optimistic, and enthusiastic about life. These look outward and spend little time examining their inward feelings. They find life pleasant and exciting. Most of us, if we had a choice, would prefer to belong to this group.

There is the melancholic type, sober and grave, often sad and easily discouraged. Most of us would not deliberately choose to have this kind of temperament, yet some of the greatest men who ever lived belonged to this group.

Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Church-yard" is a poem that cannot be improved on for the descriptive quality and poetic arrangement of its lines. With all his achievements, however, Gray's was a typically sober, dark-hued temperament. This teaches us never to despise our particular temperament, but rather to do as Gray did: accept our basic endowment, whatever it is, and do the best we can with what God has given us.

One is reminded of the story told about Dwight L. Moody. Someone criticized the grammar he used in preaching. He replied, "My dear fellow, I wish my grammar were better. I wish I had a better education. But I am using all the grammar I have for the glory of God. Are you doing as much with yours?" It is what we do with what we have that counts.

The cycle of depressive states seems to be common to man. We have times when we are up, and we have times when we are down. What we need to do is to identify ourselves with our better moods, and when we get into one of these blue Monday states, we ought to remember that this, too, shall pass. It has before, and it

will again. We need also to remember that nothing can ever happen to one of us that has not happened to somebody else. And that some of the people to whom these depressive states have been frequent occurrences have risen above them in strength and courage and have gone on to victory.

Periodically a man ought to analyze his situation and take his soul out for an inspection, even if it doesn't make him happy to discover what is there. But the man who keeps his hand on his emotional pulse all the time is not likely to be healthy-minded. The way he is feeling is too likely to determine his outlook on life. He is seldom inclined to identify himself with his happier moods. He easily becomes sensitive, and there is nothing more tragic than a sensitive person.

"To see life steadily and to see it whole" means to accept the struggle of life, with all its difficulties. We should accept it because only thus do we have a chance to develop strength of character and ability to stand up to life. To evade is to admit defeat.

The way had better not be too easy for any of us at any period of our lives. It is a grave mistake when those who have had a difficult time in childhood smooth out the road and make life too easy for their children. We may take away from them by that act the chance of developing initiative and courage. Children must experience some disappointments and hard knocks to insure the development of that quality of character which will enable them to stand up in the world's weather because they cannot come in out of it.

The thing a man needs to do when he feels a depressing mood coming upon him is to tackle himself, not denounce the circumstances that surround him. The setting for our lives is largely determined by factors beyond our control. We cannot change many of them. We did not choose our parents, or decide to be born in the United States, or choose the place here where we would be born. But what we do with the conditions presented to us is our concern. What gets one man down and causes him to evade merely becomes a challenge to another person. One often learns to rise above his difficulties so completely that others would never suspect that life is as difficult for him as it is. Another develops self-pity and tries almost every avenue of escape rather than stay and find a way to victory over the forces that are unfavorable. Self-centeredness embitters. It multiplies our problems, and we begin to see everything out of perspective. We easily conclude that everybody is against us.

A mother who had two sons was in a hospital. She spoke of one daughter-in-law as being almost a perfect human being. The younger son, the idol of his mother's heart, and still tied to mother by all sorts of apron strings, was unfortunately married to a woman to whom the mother had objected from the first. No wife could have been good enough for this son. This mother knew she never could be happy again until the younger son's marriage had gone on the rocks. She told her counselor of her strong dislike for this daughter-in-law and declared that she could not pray for her. The counselor replied: "My dear lady, you are not hurting anybody but yourself and until you learn sincerely to pray for her, you are not going to have any peace and happiness. Your world is going to shrink until it isn't worth living in if you continue to have hatred and bitterness in your heart."

A young lady was failing in school. It was easy to see why. There were too many parties and too many dates. Fun was her major interest. Did the mother find that the daughter was going out too much? Oh, no! The trouble was the schoolteacher. She didn't know how to teach and didn't know her subjects. She couldn't make the

classes interesting. She gave impossible assignments. Nobody could do that much work. It was easy to see what had happened. The mother's point of view had been warped; she had lost perspective. She saw life only from her point of view; her daughter could not possibly be at fault.

"For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it." Thus spoke our Lord, and His words point to the solution of our problem. Until we find something more worthwhile than ourselves to which we can give devotion, a being Who is worthy of our worship, life is not going to be worth much, nor will it have much meaning. We may selfishly hold on to our lives for awhile, but actually we have lost them. "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it." Only he will save it who is willing to lose it for God in the service of others.

If you are going to face life as you should, and get the most out of it, you must have a personal faith in God, upon Whom you can depend, and from Whom nothing can separate you except your voluntarily turning away. Such personal faith is the foundation for enduring courage. It makes it possible for the weakest of us to face life and not evade its difficulties. Such faith will give us the courage to accept what we cannot change and endure what we ought to suffer. If we can change a bad situation, we should do so. If we can't change it, we can, through faith in God, find the courage to stand fast, to avoid self-pity, and not evade our responsibilities.

Today, as we face the world's dark tragedies, its innumerable woes, its deluge of blood and tears, its chasms, its wars, its bloodshed, its wonderings and wanderings and wickedness, we must turn from mere philosophic finery to the plain sensible language of Christianity which heartens men to serve the Lord. What the world needs is the service of Christians. Its wrongs cannot be righted, its grievances cannot be redressed, its injustices cannot be corrected, and its ignorance cannot be dissipated except through service.

Only as we let Christ rule us and use us will we come up to the fullness of our possibilities in genuine service. But what wondrous possibilities in us will rise in majesty to meet His own if we let Him who went about doing good completely dominate us.

Livingstone, the weaver lad, gave himself to Christ and served Him. He thereby opened a highway over which Ethiopia stumbles with outstretched hands toward God. Moody, the bootstore clerk, served Christ by rocking two continents toward God. John Bunyan was placed in jail for serving Christ and while imprisoned he wrote a book which crawled out from the jail and traveled over more highways and knocked at more doors and spoke to more people in their mother tongue than any book save the ONE BOOK, the Bible.

A twenty-year old boy captain lay on the ground one night on the battlefield of Kenesaw Mountain. A stretcher bearer, seeking for the wounded, bent down over him to try to hear heartbeats. He arose and said, "He's gone! His chest is blown open." They went away and left that pile of bleeding flesh in the darkness. That heap of

bloody misery lay there through the night -- no bedding but the ground, no pitying eyes but the stars, no voice but the night bird's shrill call and the fox's yelp, no hand but the fingers of the dew and no companions but the dead.

Up in a little town in Massachusetts a father and mother had been praying for this boy through all the months of fighting. That boy had run away from home twice. At Yale University he had worked in kitchens and wherever else he could find odd jobs to pay his tuition. He had become "wise" as youth sometimes become. The university had knocked his religion into a cocked hat; he was known and registered as an atheist. And this looked like the end. But there was life in that body. In the brain a mighty parade of thought was passing. All that his father and mother had taught him of religion and God came back to him. He was converted there that night waiting for someone to come and pick him up. The next morning when someone came and found him alive they took him to the hospital. What was the possibility of that bleeding battle bruised boy? The stretcher bearer thought none. The seekers for the wounded thought none. But what became of that bleeding boy who was thereafter dominated by Christ and served Him? For one thing, the great Temple University of Philadelphia through which have passed far beyond a quarter of a million students. For another thing, three great hospitals. For another thing, the education of hundreds of young people, to which object Dr. Russell H. Conwell donated more than eight million dollars earned in lecturing. For another thing, a great preacher, a great church, and twenty books superbly written and widely read and far-reachingly influential. For another thing, one of America's great men who, though he earned millions of dollars, never had more than \$100 of his own at any time.

Not all win renown on earth who serve Christ. Not all will be famous as Russell Conwell was famous. Not all will be in large type. The only chance you may have to serve God may be in small type or as a comma or exclamation point. But that doesn't lessen the possibility of great service.

The life that is spent in the service of Christ is a saved life; but, the life that is spent for self is a lost life. What are you going to do with your life and its possibilities?