

IT'S THE LIFE THAT COUNTS

"Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." Matthew 7:21.

At Christmas we emphasize the birth of Christ, and marvel that He made His appearance on earth. At Easter we emphasize the resurrection of Christ from the grave, and what that significant event means to us. We also need to emphasize the life that Christ lived between Bethlehem and Calvary. When all is said and done, it's the life that counts. Apart from the life that He lived, Christ's birth would not have had a special meaning and His resurrection would have been an impossibility.

With us, too, it's the life that counts: not our birth, high or low; not our looks, good or bad; not our money, or prestige, or position. It's our life that counts: not our professed beliefs, nor the forms of our worship, nor the church in which we have our membership. It is how we live that counts. As Emerson put it, "What you are speaks so loudly that I cannot hear what you say."

Men with spiritual insight have always known this. Let me mention and discuss a few of them.

I. Amos.

The prophet Amos heard God say to the children of Israel: "I hate, I despise your feast days, But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:21, 24). Amos was teaching that "It's the life that counts."

II. Micah.

Micah was also a great prophet who lived in the eighth century before Christ. He lived in a time when people did not want any preaching done except the weak variety, that would allow them to go in their way without embarrassment. It is a tragic hour when people want to hear only the man who caters to their selfish and sinful natures. The sins of Micah's day may be summarized as follows: -- oppression of the poor, unscrupulous use of power, lack of integrity, reckless scorn of religion, false prophets, and greedy corruption in religious and state circles. God called Micah to denounce the evils that were blighting his people. But his ministry was far more than one of denunciation. His message was constructive also. He defined real religion in these words: "He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" (Micah 6:8). Micah set forth three elements in the complete life, or three things which God requires of His children:

1. Integrity of character.

Is it not strange that people have to be required to do justly? What is it to do justly? It is simply to give all their due.

(1) Give to God His due.

To love God with all your mind, heart, soul, and strength is your first duty. God has a perfect right to ask it and to expect it of you.

(2) Give others their due.

"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." To give him his due, you must do unto him as you would have him do unto you.

(3) Give yourself your due.

To deal justly with yourself, you must not deprive your soul of that which God has provided for its culture.

Character alone is the true wealth. It is so easy, under the influence of the spirit of the age and the pressure of society, to become convinced that the thing to do is to follow the crowd in believing that cleverness, austuteness, and worldly wisdom are the qualities that matter most; to set rights above duties, self-interest above self-sacrifice, and success above simple sincerity of soul. As Rudyard Kipling said to the Saint Andrews students, "A man may be festooned with the whole haberdashery of success, and go to his grave a castaway." The one thing that lasts is character. The one thing that matters is what a man is, when his soul stands alone before its God. The Bible reminds us, "And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever" (I John 2:17). Truly, it's the life that counts.

2. Sympathy of heart.

God requires His children "to love mercy." God asks not only that we be just, but also that we be kind. Kindness is love in action. God wants us to have a mercifulness in action.

3. Reverence of spirit.

God requires His children "to walk humbly" with Him. Walking humbly with God means friendship, companionship, and fellowship. "Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). Walking with God, which is indicative of progress, is a superlative privilege. This walk is one of joy and triumph.

"Oh, for a closer walk with God,
A calm and heavenly frame;
A light to shine upon the road
That leads me to the Lamb!"

--William Cowper

III. Jesus Christ.

Our Lord made the issue clear when He said that anyone who heard His teachings and applied them to life would build his house on solid rock. But Christ warned, "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven."

What, according to our Lord, are the things that must characterize us, if we are to be true, victorious, and useful Christians?

1. A good heart.

The condition of one's heart determines the conduct of one's life. "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life." A Christian heart, a good heart, means a good life. "Doth a fountain send forth at the same place sweet water and bitter" (James 3:11). The same fountain cannot yield both salt water and fresh. If the stream is to be pure, its source must be pure. If one is to be obedient to God, his heart must be right with God and with men.

2. A worthy character.

The fruitage of a good heart is a godly life. "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit; but a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit. A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit" (Matthew 7:17-18).

Partaking of the divine nature manifests itself in what we are. If what we have, which we call religion, does not affect our characters, causing us to be dependable and loyal to Christ, it is something spurious; it is not the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

True religion consists in being something, believing something, and doing something. As a colored brother expressed it: "Be what you is, and not what you ain't; because if you ain't what you is, you is what you ain't." Prove to others that you are a child of God in character.

It is a fine thing to have a good reputation. Reputation may keep you in good standing with men, it may open to you many doors of opportunity, it may elevate you to a position of eminence and distinction among men; but it is not what men think of you or say about you, but what you are, that counts with God, that counts for or against His kingdom.

3. A life of good deeds.

A right relationship with God will manifest itself in doing good. Those who are in fellowship with Christ will feel the burden of Christ's mission to a sinful, sick, suffering, and sorrowing world.

Our Lord went about doing good. He tramped over the land of Judea, ministering constantly to the needs of others. He said, "I am in the midst of you as he that serveth." Concerning His mission in the world, He said: "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." Our deeds must conform to our professions. It is not enough to call Him Lord. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." It's the life that counts. "By their fruits ye shall know them."

One day St. Francis of Assisi walked with a young priest into the village where the young man was to preach his first sermon. They visited with people, inquired about the sick, and gave evidence of their concern for all they met. Before they realized it, they were back at the monastery. The young man asked, "When am I to begin to preach?" Francis answered, "My son, today you have learned your first lesson about preaching. It is of no use to walk anywhere to preach, unless you preach as you walk." That was simply another way of saying, "It's the life that counts." And I trust that you also know that this is true: "It's the life that counts."