

THE SPIRITUAL GLOW

"Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord" (Romans 12:11).

This urgent counsel was given to a little company of dedicated disciples who were living in the city of Rome. In that environment they were beset by evil incitements, suggestions, and antagonisms. They lived and wrought where the majesty of evil had its throne and sovereignty. Paul told them that nothing but a spiritual fire would endow them with the power which would be necessary for them to resist their temptations successfully.

One wonders if there is any other counsel of Paul which is more timely and urgent for our own day.

The expression, "Not slothful in business," is sometimes translated "Not lagging behind in diligence," "Never be lazy in your work," and "Never let your zeal lag," or "Never slack in earnestness."

The expression, "Fervent in spirit," is translated, "Be glowing in spirit," "Have your spirits aglow," and "Maintain the spiritual glow." It would be difficult to improve on Moffatt's challenging phraseology, "Maintain the spiritual glow" both in your worship which without that glow must die into dull formality, and in the workaday world where it is so hard to maintain the glow of spiritual power. This text, then, challenges us to relate ourselves properly both to worship and to work. Work covers a very large area of life, and the proportion of time and energy given to it is significant. Even in this age of shorter working hours, the average man gives far too little time to worship.

What did Paul mean by his challenge, "Maintain the spiritual glow?" He meant that to be a Christian is to live zestfully. He meant that to call Christ Lord and Master, and to follow Him, is to be possessed of a glowing heart. Paul had learned this from the Master Himself. He had learned it from his fellow Christians also. Best of all, he had learned it from experience. Paul had known much about suffering and hardship. Time and again he had been to the whipping post. After being stoned he had been left for dead. Most likely he had been inside more Roman prisons than any criminal in the Roman Empire. Although we find him without his freedom, and without enough clothing to keep him warm, we never find him without a glowing heart.

Paul learned this from Christ. Whatever else we may think of Christ, we must be impressed by the fact that He lived zestfully. He constantly maintained the spiritual glow. He had a joy that nothing could overshadow. Repeatedly He spoke the thrilling language of the glowing heart. Over and over He said, "Be of good cheer." Christ moved frequently among cheerless folks. He knew multitudes for whom life had grown dull and gray. Therefore, He constantly tried to teach them the secret of the inward glow.

That is also what Christ meant when, in speaking to His friends on the mountainside, He said, "Ye are the salt of the earth." What a full and radiant word! It is so simple that a child can understand something of its meaning, and yet it is so profound that the wisest cannot fully fathom it.

What did Christ mean by His statement, "Ye are the salt of the earth"? Salt has three outstanding properties -- penetration, purification, and preservation. It exists for others and it does its work gradually, silently, and inconspicuously.

Salt has two functions -- to season and to preserve. Salt gives taste to food. Salt is to preserve from corruption that on which it is sprinkled.

Christ's statement, "Ye are the salt of the earth," clearly implies that there is rottenness in this world. Christians are to exercise their sweetening, purifying, and preserving powers in the time and place where they live. Whether men realize it or not, it is the presence of the believers in Christ that saves the world from destruction. Frequently people are talking in an unworthy manner, when suddenly a Christian enters the circle and immediately, without him saying a word, he has a wholesome effect.

By His statement, "Ye are the salt of the earth," Christ meant that to be a Christian is to be different. He expects Christians, who follow Him, to be far better than those who do not. He asked His friends this question: "What do ye more than others?" When He found that they were not any more gallant, attractive, or unselfish than those who did not know Him, it broke His heart. Just what difference has Christ made in you? What is there in you that simply could not be there but for Him? If there is nothing, then you are not a Christian.

Christ taught that this difference is to be a positive one. Too long have many thought of Christianity in terms of harmlessness. A Christian is not one who merely does not do any harm; he is a positive factor -- in his home, in his church, in his community, and in whatever circles he moves. His presence makes a difference. He is one who cannot be ignored any more than salt can be ignored. Salt is something that we miss when it is absent, and that we always recognize when it is present. A Christian is to be like that.

A Christian is to be a purifying and preventive force. Without the presence of Christians this world does not improve; it deteriorates. Instead of it making progress toward the heights, it disintegrates, and rots down. Every great tragedy that comes into life comes on account of the lack of the saving salt of Christ-like character. Christ said that to be a Christian is to be a positive, preventive, and preserving force.

Perhaps the richest meaning that Christ put into this great word is that to be a Christian is to find the secret of the zestful life. It is to find a tang in the feast of life and to be able to give that tang to others. Life in fellowship with Christ has a tang. The Christian knows the secret of the spiritual glow. That was one of the first impressions made by the early saints. At Pentecost they were so joyful that their critics could not explain them. Thinking that they had to offer some reason for the joyfulness of the Christians, the critics made the accusation that they were intoxicated from the use of new wine. Instead, they had a spiritual glow that made that drab world wistful. And what they possessed in the long ago has been the priceless possession of millions since. Here, then is a privilege for every one of us, who are Christians -- we may have a zest that the man of the world cannot know.

All of us have hours when we are conscious of the glowing spirit. Our hearts

burn within us as we journey. Sometimes these hours arrive unexpectedly; at other times after periods of prayer. But when such hours come, the inner life grows radiant. But the great difficulty is in maintaining the spiritual glow. And yet the divine command is laid on us, poor unstable mortals though we be, that our duty is to maintain the spiritual glow. It can be ours in spite of poor health. It can be ours whatever our temperament. It is not given just for rare or precious moments. It is meant for every mile of the long Christian journey. And just there the difficulty lies, of maintaining, through dark and dreary days, the radiance and the warmth of hours of insight. And we may be certain that when God commands a thing, He never mocks us with impossibilities. What He commands He gives the power to do.

At one time, in the life of each Christian, a fire was lighted in the heart, and each revered the things that were lovely and of good report. Then each saw in Christ the Saviour a Master and a Friend. Coming to more mature years, there came the discovery that the spiritual fire was a delicate flame. When it was neglected, the flame died down, and the life lay open to the attacks of unspiritual things. However, the warmth of the spiritual glow drove back the forces of evil. But the spiritual glow does not keep on glowing if it is left unattended. It has to be nourished and fed just as any other fire has to be watched and fed. The spiritual glow has to be maintained. It only keeps on glowing as one looks after it.

It is possible for a Christian to lose the spiritual glow. If he keeps his spiritual radiance, or lives zestfully, it requires some effort on his part. This tragic loss of enthusiasm for Christ threatens all of us. We are thinking now of some who were very enthusiastic for Christ in former days. They did have a spiritual glow, but that was in former days. A noteworthy feature of many church members today is that they have lost the inward glow, or the burning heart.

What is the tragedy of this loss? It means the loss of joy. To fail to maintain the inward glow is to become bored with life. Those who lose the inward glow go to church, when they do, much like an ox going to the slaughter. When one loses his spiritual glow, he is likely to lose his usefulness. When to some who were once active in the church we put the question, "Why did you quit?", they tell us simply, "I lost interest — just became bored, tired, fed up. I failed to get any thrill out of it." Those who lose the spiritual glow usually lose their winsomeness. A joyless religion is not attractive. It can be about the most ugly and repellent thing in the world. It is only the joyful Christian that is winsome.

How shall we maintain the spiritual glow? Our souls are only kept aglow as we keep in close touch with Christ. There is an unwritten saying attributed to Christ: "He that is near me is near the fire." What a power Christianity would be today if each Christian could say with David Brainerd, "Oh, that I were a flaming fire in the hands of my God," or with Henry Martyn, "Let my life burn out for God."

The words, "Maintain the spiritual glow," cause us to think of that entry in Wesley's journal which has become one of the monuments of English literature. Here was a man who had crossed the Atlantic Ocean only to discover "that I, who went to America to convert the Indians, was never myself converted to God." Wesley felt that he would give his last drop of blood to secure for himself that sense of pardon and peace and joy through believing which some of his friends possessed.

The experience was not denied him. Here are his own immortal words of testimony: "In the evening (May 24, 1738) I went unwillingly to a society in Alders-gate-street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works on the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death." "I felt my heart strangely warmed" -- he had received the spiritual glow through simple trust in the only Saviour. And there is no other way to such an experience.

None can assess the possibilities of the life that has received the spiritual glow. Surely the great need of the dark and difficult days in which our lot has been cast is for men and women who have received the spiritual glow and will maintain it. There is something so quietly consistent, so steadfast and sure, about a glow that is maintained.

Let us not ask for nor seek the sensational. Abraham Lincoln used to tell a story of a boat that plied the Mississippi River which had such a big whistle that every time it was blown they had to stop the boat to get up steam. That is typical of much Christian experience and enterprise. There is the creation of tremendous enthusiasm which manifests itself in one terrific blaze of glory which burns itself out. God wants the steady, spiritual glow. The value of the study of God's Word and spending time in prayer cannot be overstated.

We do not like to face the sober truth that as Christians we are swimming against the tide, and, if we stop, nothing can keep us from drifting the wrong way. You and I are either better or poorer Christians than we were a year ago.

"Let us not allow slackness to spoil our work, but let us keep the fires of the spirit burning as we do our work for God." How? We know what keeps a fire burning and what extinguishes it. Fuel and air will keep it going, but water and suffocation will extinguish it. And we know what keeps the fires of the spirit burning, and what is likely to quench them. There are habits, practices, places, people, books, music, and patterns of thought which are as fuel and air for the fires of the spirit within. And we know that there are similar things which tend to suffocate and quench them. The text of life is in the long pull. The test is endurance. "To live life to the very end is difficult," but the important thing is finishing the course.

One of the best ways of maintaining the spiritual glow is to keep in the company of our fellow-believers who are living close to and working for God. In the fellowship of kindred minds we shall experience nearness to the Saviour, for He has pledged Himself to be in the midst of His followers.

The spiritual glow can only be maintained by sacrifice. After ignition there always comes combustion, and that, of course, is sacrificial. The wood and the coal must be consumed if you are to have a fire by which to keep warm. Of John the Baptist our Lord said, "He was a burning and a shining light." The burning precedes the shining. Christians are like coals, in that they burn brightest when they are gathered together. If we are ready to live sacrificially for God, we shall maintain the spiritual glow. If we are to maintain the spiritual glow, we must keep in close touch with the Lord and work faithfully for Him.