

WHY LIVE THE HARD WAY?

Acts 3:1-11

Many people do their work the hard way. Maybe they manage to do it successfully, but they do it the hard way. This sort of thing shows itself in a variety of ways. A nervous breakdown is a frequent occurrence in these days of tension, and people often think that it is due to overwork. Many have a nervous breakdown not because they work too hard, but because they fought their jobs. They built up resistances and constantly struggled with these resistances. And it was the resistance that broke them. You must never fight a job. Think about it, but don't fight it. Just do it the best you can and without fighting it. Then you will be doing it long after the man who fought the job has his name on a tombstone. Why live the hard way?

But how do you avoid living the hard way? A splendid answer to this question is found in the story which is recorded in the first ten verses of Acts three.

Peter and John, two sturdy, healthy, peace-filled, faith-filled, and dedicated men, were going up to the temple in Jerusalem to attend a prayer service. These men enjoyed fellowship with each other and communion with God together. Like all of those who have been the greatest blessing to mankind through the ages, they loved God and frequented the place of prayer and worship with regularity. Even though these men were poor, they went to the temple to pray. Poverty certainly did not prevent them from being happy. Some have the false notion that there is no happiness apart from the things that money can buy. Some of the happiest people are poor, and some of the most unhappy ones possess fortunes. Fine houses, expensive clothing, and high-priced cars do not make people happy. Happiness springs out of a contented spirit rather than a large bank account.

The gate by which these men approached the temple was composed of Corinthian brass, and was nearly fifty feet in height and twenty feet in width. It was adorned with perfect skill. It represented all that art could do. It was the masterpiece of the workmanship of man. When the sun shone upon it the people would cry "Beautiful," until at last the gate got that as its name. Yet there beside it sat a helpless beggar. What a contrast! Infinite beauty and colossal wealth in stone and metal, and beside it was ugliness, poverty, and privation in life!

Only a few feet from this Beautiful Gate sat a man with crippled legs, who had never walked. This helpless man was carted there each morning by his parents or friends and put in this same place in order that he might beg alms. This cripple was not aware that he could do anything except just sit there accepting alms. Along came these two healthy men, and this beggar held out his hand and said, "Bakshish! Bakshish!", which means "Give me something!" This cripple understood the philosophy of benevolence. He knew that the best people in and around Jerusalem went into the temple to worship. He knew that the kindest and most sympathetic people are praying people. Christianity and compassion have always gone hand in hand. This afflicted man was shrewd enough to know where to go for alms. The man who loves God most is the one who will do the most for his fellowmen. A familiar observation, easy to confirm, is that the person who neglects church attendance is usually leaving undone just about everything else that a Christian ought to be doing. He is not praying; he is not reading the Bible; he is not witnessing to others; he is not giving. The lame man had good reasons for stationing himself near the door of the house of worship at the hour of prayer.

This man needed money, but there were other things which he needed worse than he did that. He needed health, which is a priceless gift. The value of money pales into insignificance in comparison with health. All this poor fellow wanted was money. He did not have any hope of ever being any better than he was. The most obvious need of this man was for silver and gold. His deeper needs were not mentioned as he made his

appeal for alms. And it was in terms of money that people were responding. Yet this was the kind of help with which the afflicted man might well have dispensed if he had been given something better. He had been receiving silver and gold for forty years, but these things left him as he was -- a helpless, hopeless cripple, carried by others, begging for alms to hold body and soul together. He was certainly living the hard way. Many people could give him money, but it remained for Peter and John to provide him with something better.

Peter and John stopped and looked at this man. Looking beneath the surface, they saw that it was not just money that he needed. He knew what some of us need to learn, namely, that the problems of distressed humanity cannot be solved by monetary gifts. Money can do many things for people. It can be used to provide a house in which to live, to make a home comfortable, to purchase many of the necessities of life, to educate children, to relieve distress, to cheer the discouraged, to help the struggling, and to advance the cause of Christ. However, there are many things that money cannot do. Money cannot buy love. The love of a mother, the fidelity of a father, the affection of a sister, the sympathy of a brother, or the trust of a friend cannot be bought with money. Neither can money buy a good conscience, bring contentment, purchase health, obtain grace, or secure a home in heaven. Money is a valuable possession, but it is not the greatest by any means.

What took place as Peter and John went to the temple that day reminds us that the choicest opportunities in life usually come unsought. Had they neglected to go to the place of worship, they would have lost the glorious opportunity of seeing what the Lord could do. Peter and John did not ignore the man and pass by. Instead, they stopped, and gazed intently upon this dejected man who sat there with his head down. This defeated character had been looking down for years. Peter could not stand that. Speaking for both of them in a commanding voice, he said: "Look on us!" Startled by this command, the cripple looked up and was caught by the eye of Peter. He fully expected to receive a contribution from him.

This cripple, who was thoroughly accustomed to living the hard way, had fastened on himself certain limitations. He was a cripple and that was all he ever expected to be; this was his niche in life. He didn't like it, but he was used to it. If you have an image of yourself as being hopelessly handicapped, that is how you will be. And a crippled body is not nearly as limiting as is a crippled mind or soul. But Peter resolved that he would break his limitations, and give him a new image of himself in his own mind, so that it would not be necessary for him to continue living the hard way.

Most of us, too, are victims of self-imposed limitations. We get an idea about ourselves, an image of ourselves; we think this is all that we can do, and all that we can be; this is the little area of life in which we have to live. We tell ourselves that there are certain things we cannot do. We say that our limitations run in the family. Actually, nothing runs in a family except a wrong attitude.

If you have been living the hard way, get yourself identified with Christ Who lived the right way. He had poise and emotional health. He had physical strength. He had mental acumen. He had everything. And, if you live with Him in your heart and life, you will grow more and more like Him. Identify your life with Christ and you won't have to live the hard way any more. Why live the hard way?

The heart of the cripple must have sunk within him when he heard the disappointing words: "Silver and gold have I none." Certainly no one can give anything that he does not have. When Peter continued: "But such as I have give I thee," the man's hopes began to rise again. With quickened interest he wondered what Peter was going to give him. Then, Peter added: "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk."

Stooping down, Peter took him by the right hand, and lifted him up: and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength." It was the power of Christ that had wrought the healing through His apostle. On the basis of this incident, I want to make three observations.

I. The Apostles Gave What They Had.

Speaking for John and himself Peter said: "Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee." The apostles could not give anything except that which they had. How poor they were; and yet, how rich! For three years they had walked with Christ, living by faith, and not carrying any purse as they went about their labors at the bidding of their Master. Their visible resources were practically nothing, but their invisible resources were unlimited. They had that with which the poorest is rich, and without which the richest is poor. Sharing what they had was no more than they should have done. It was intended that they should use what had been entrusted to them, which is true of every Christian today. The Lord will not deal lightly with those who have neglected their opportunities and ignored their responsibilities.

II. The Apostles Gave What They Had in the Name of Christ.

Herein lies the merit of their gift. Giving which leaves Christ out, and which aims only to benefit the recipient or to bring honor or benefit or satisfaction to the giver is without promise of heavenly reward. The ultimate test of our gifts, our virtues, and our services is quite simple: Are we seeking thereby to serve and honor our Lord; or is there some lesser motive? Did we give or serve for Christ's sake, or is it because of some social pressure?

III. The Apostles Gave Something Far Better Than Silver and Gold.

Money is spent quickly. Health fails, sooner or later. Only that which is done for the soul is eternal. In the light of eternity, sending an astronaut to the moon and bringing him back alive is a lesser achievement by far than directing a soul to the heavenly home. Nothing can ever compensate for the neglect of the soul. The gospel of Christ, which has been entrusted to those of us who are Christians, does what money can never do.

The cure of the cripple was instantaneous, complete, and permanent. He was healed not only in body, but in soul as well. When he was healed, he was hilarious with joy. He stood, and walked, and leaped, and praised God. He simply had to use his new-found powers and to give vent to his ecstasy of delight. With gratitude in his heart he entered the temple and worshiped God. The people were struck with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him. They reasoned that the miracle which had taken place could have been effected only by divine power. They were glad for him, and rejoiced with him.

Why was the healed man so happy and grateful? It was because of what he had received. What were some of the things which he had received?

1. Sympathy.

They had stopped, spoken to him, and extended the hand of friendship. It did not cost them a cent of money to render this service, but it did require dedication to Christ. Oh, how much real Christian sympathy means to people, and how easy it is to extend it! Such sympathy puts a new light in the eye, a quickness in the step, and courage in the heart. And even the poorest can give sympathy

2. Love.

Scores of people had put money in his hands, but they had scorned him while doing so. Peter gave him the handclasp of brotherly love.

3. Healing.

That was far better than money. Who can put a price on health?

4. Liberty.

All of his life he had been a prisoner, but at last he had been set free from his terrible handicap. How sweet that freedom was!

5. Joy.

Floodgates of real joy had been opened for him that day.

6. Hope.

He fully expected better tomorrows. He did not expect to have to continue living the hard way.

7. Inspiration.

His load had been lifted, and life had a new meaning for him. He had a new inspiration to live. Whoever inspires another to live a nobler and better life has given him a blessing of inestimable worth. That business man who found Russell H. Conwell as a dirty lad who had slept in an ash barrel, carried him to his home, and had him take a bath, clothed him in a new suit, and took him to Sunday School with him that Sunday morning made an investment that will bear dividends until the end of time. The warm breakfast, the new suit, and the comfortable room were as nothing compared to the inspiration that came into the heart of that waif of the street. It is no wonder that he wrote "Acres of Diamonds," in which he related the story of his life.

These priceless gifts may come from the Lord through us who love Him into the lives of those who need them so much.