

CASTING SHADOWS

"Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them." Acts 5:15.

What a silent thing a shadow is! It is an intangible something which is almost indefinable. Noiselessly it falls, not a word does it speak, not a sound does it make. In the East a shadow of a person has a far greater significance than it has here. Even to this day, in India, a Brahmin would throw his food away if the shadow of an outcast fell upon it.

In the Book of Acts we are told that when Peter was healing the sick by the power of God, those who were unable to get near him for the crowd, so that he might heal them by the touch of his hand, were laid by their friends along the street, so that when Peter passed by his shadow might fall on them and heal them. The pale, upturned faces of these afflicted people did not appeal for help in vain. The pathetic spectacle was swiftly changed into one of joy. Not one in the motley crowd was overlooked. "They were healed every one." Their colorless cheeks and tear-dimmed eyes received the glow and lustre of health. They believed on the Lord and identified themselves with His people.

By what means were these signs and wonders wrought? By the "hands of the Apostles," and "the shadow of Peter." It seems that those who could not receive the hand-touch because of the crowd, had their faith responded to through the medium of Peter's shadow. As Peter passed along the street the sun was shining upon him, and, all unconsciously to him, the shadow he cast fell first on this couch and then on that, and at once mourning was turned to rejoicing, groans ceased, and the bed-ridden were strong again. His shadow was eagerly sought by the sick ones or their friends, not because it was a shadow, but because to them it was the symbol of healing and good cheer. Whoever heard of the shadow of a person acting the part of a physician? Those people used Peter's shadow as a charm, and God made it to them what they wanted it to be. But why did He do so? Because of the simplicity of their faith God performed this miracle with unusual effectiveness. The healing power was supernatural. So far as nature is concerned, there was as much or as little healing power in the shadow of Peter as there was in the touch of his hand. The God who could use the touch of a hand to heal a sick man could just as easily use the touch or the reflection of a shadow.

As Peter passed up and down the streets of Jerusalem he cast a shadow on one side or the other. As you go up and down the streets of life, passing the sick, the wounded, the sorrowful, the glad, and the jubilant, you always cast a shadow. There is one self that you can carry about with you, and that other self, the shadow self which has touched the lives of others. As we go through life, always an influence falls from us, as noiselessly, but as inevitably as the shadow. This verse has been selected as a text, not so much to discuss the historic fact or significance of this incident, but to illustrate various aspects of personal influence.

I. The Reality Of Our Shadows.

Just as the shadow of Peter fell upon those lying along his pathway, so are we always influencing, either for blessing or for blight, those with whom we are coming into necessary contact day by day. Each one of us exerts some kind of influence, and we can no more help doing so than we can keep from casting a real shadow on a sunny day. As certainly as the sun radiates its heat, every man casts a shadow. No man has ever been able to run away from his shadow, for his shadow is part of himself. Wherever he goes, it goes with him. It moves when he moves, it is still when he stops, it stands when he stands, and it crouches when he sits. And yet there are few things about us of which we are less conscious

than our shadows. There are no two shadows that are just alike. In real life there is no such thing as a person without a shadow. The shadow we cannot help casting on every life we touch is our influence. Influence is something that baffles definition. It is too elastic and too elusive to be mapped out in words. It is a silent, subtle, sovereign something that goes out from every life like heat from a fire, or fragrance from a flower, and gives shape and color to other lives. No matter who or what you are from the social or the intellectual standpoint, you are an influence. You cast a shadow on other lives and that continually.

No matter who you are or where you are, you act and are acted upon. We give color to the lives of each other, and do much to mold and to shape the destinies of each other. As leaven influences the meal in which it is placed, so we in some way affect those with whom we are brought in contact. The fact of influence is so patent as to need no insistence, for it is one of the outstanding realities of our lives. It is as strange as it is true, as inescapable as it is undeniable, and as real as the fact of our existence.

To honestly consider its possibilities for good or evil can bring to us nothing less than a clear vision of the great seriousness of life. Casting shadows is not only a capacity; it is the inevitable result of being. There is no neutrality here. A man must influence his fellowmen whether he will or not, be it for blessing, like the perfume of the tender violet, or for cursing, like the poisonous microbes of some contagious disease. If light is within him, it must shine; if darkness is within him, it must shed its gloom. If his soul is warm with love, it must radiate; if it is frozen with selfishness, those who come near will feel its chill. As James Stalker said, "Your influence is the precise equivalent of your human worth or worthlessness."

Now this influence, which is as real as our shadows, is either voluntary or involuntary, conscious or unconscious. Every life performs a double ministry--the purposed and intended, and the unpurposed and the unplanned.

1. The voluntary or the conscious shadows.

Before Christ ascended, He declared that the apostles should heal all manner of diseases. In the chapter from which our text is taken we have a fulfillment of this prediction. The apostles put forth their hands for the purpose of curing the pain-stricken. They voluntarily touched the sick and healed them. Such we take to be voluntary and conscious influence.

Whenever we do anything with aim, whenever we exercise our wills, and bring the faculties of our minds into play to accomplish specific objectives, we exert voluntary and conscious influence. A man lives, we will say, fifty years in a community, and dies. There will be the buildings he has erected, the business he has organized, set going, and built, the improvements he has made in the community, the wealth he has accumulated, and many other tangible things. These were the things he lived to do, the things he thought about and wrought out in his life.

2. The involuntary or the unconscious shadows.

We may influence others when we are making an earnest and deliberate effort to do so. But oftentimes our most effective and abiding influence will be unconscious. When Peter ran with John to the sepulcher on the day of the Resurrection when they heard the tidings that the grave was empty, John, being the younger and the more active, did outrun Peter, and came first to the tomb.

But he feared to enter, and was hesitating at the entrance to the tomb, when Peter came toiling up and in his impulsive manner went at once into the tomb and saw how empty it was. "Then entered in also that other disciple, and believed." Peter was not thinking of influencing John when he hurried into the sepulcher; but his courageous act was contagious and stirred John into action and brought him into a belief in the resurrection of his Lord.

Peter was not passing down the street that day for the sake of casting a shadow. He had not even noticed that the shadow was there. He was going about his business, and the shadow came of itself. Just as we are rarely conscious of our shadows, so it is true that we are rarely conscious of our influence. Our unconscious influence is a result not of what we do, but of what we are, and hence is unvarying, certain in its effects, and full of power. Of the two it is by far the greater, for what a man is always counts more than what he does.

The shadow which Peter cast upon the diseased restored them. Unintentionally and unconsciously a curative virtue went out from him, giving strength and joy to all who came within the reach of his shadow. It is this influence which we all possess, an influence which flows from us and is noiseless in its working. Although our undesigned influence is diffused with the least noise, it is most potent, either as a rich blessing or as a withering curse. It is penetrating, searching, and transforming.

A man's shadow is a result of his position with regard to the sun. Its length and its sort depend on where he stands in relationship to the shining rays. In a similar way the influence of a man's character is entirely conditioned by his relationship to the Son of Righteousness. What I am toward Jesus Christ determines also what I am toward men, for relationship with Him controls the quality of my entire life. As a man's shadow is a projection of the likeness of his physical form upon some other body, so his influence is the expression of his real self, and hence is conditioned by the actual quality of his inner life.

Whether you intend it or not, your shadow goes out day by day and hour by hour to heal or to hurt, to bless or to blight all you touch in this world. You cannot be a neutral. Our Lord stated that quite definitely when He said: "He that is not for Me is against Me." You can either be a blot or a blessing, but a blank you cannot be. You cannot throw a pebble into a pond without causing ripples which will go on till they reach the shore. And you cannot move in any sphere of life without causing ripples of influence which at long last break on the shore of eternity.

One day a little babe opened his eyes to this world, eyes he had never opened before; parted his lips and cried for help. None were present but the mother, the father, the doctor, and the nurse. The little babe lived, laughed and played one brief year; then one day the doctor came back looking grave. The mother's voice was hushed in tearful silence, and the little babe wanted to be lifted in the mother's arms and sung to sleep, and it was. But the eyes closed and opened no more. He never spoke, he never wrought, he never achieved; but he made tracks the traffic of the world will never put out. His little shadow will be traced through the mother's and father's hearts down to the last day they live. Never a human breathed the breath of life who did not leave a shadow.

II. The Responsibility For Our Shadows.

A bird flying through the air, a cloud floating in the sky, a branch waving in the breezes cast a shadow and that shadow can never be recalled. So the shadow of human life has an unchangeable and irrevocable aspect about it which is very arresting and solemn. When a stone has been cast into a placid lake or pool, the circles of eddies keep on spreading and multiplying long after the stone which created them has sunk to the bottom of the pool. So, the eddies or circles of our influence, the thought, the word, the deed which has gone out from us keeps moving on, and we can no more stop them or recall them than the stone in the bottom of the lake can stop the circles of eddies which are spreading rapidly across the face of the water. This is true of the good influence as well as the bad.

Every man is responsible for the kind of influence he is continuously exerting. The fact of its inevitableness involves us in the duty of determining its worthy quality. The Christian is never "off duty." His shadow is always with him, falling either upon strangers or upon those who know him best, and his influence is always being exerted for good or evil. Wherever we go, our influence goes. It moves before us, beside us, and behind us. As a man's character develops his influence grows more pronounced. As he gains in knowledge, in ripeness of judgment, in spiritual insight, his influence becomes more weighty, pervasive, and attractive. He becomes a power. On the other hand, if he becomes vacillating, superficial, controversial, or explosive, his influence dwindles or sways men in the wrong way.

Christian influence, of course, depends upon Christian character. A man may have but little of this world's goods, and may occupy a lowly sphere; but if he has the Christ-like disposition, his influence will be very beneficial. On the other hand, a man may possess extensive knowledge, immense wealth, and may move in the highest secular circles, but unless he has the Christ-like spirit his treasures and status may fill him with pride, and his influence may be as deadly as a pestilence.

We should strenuously endeavor to exert a good influence because of our responsibility. The good that men do is not interred with their bones. Their influence does not cease when they pass into the unseen. Though dead, they live in their works. Their works speak so eloquently that they inspire and enrich us. Furthermore, we should strive to exert a good influence because it will be a source of infinite joy. It will cause joy to well up in the heart now—a joy which springs from the sense of duty done, as well as from making others better, happier and nobler. Then, we should endeavor to exert a good influence because it is the will of Christ for us to do so. He said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

Howard Arnold Walter wisely said:

"I would be true, for there are those who trust me,
I would be pure, for there are those who care;
I would be strong, for there is much to suffer;
I would be brave, for there is much to dare;
I would be friend of all—the poor, the friendless,
I would be giving, and forget the gift;
I would be humble, for I know my weakness;
I would look up, and laugh, and love, and lift."

The time will come for you and me when all that we leave behind us, so far as this life is concerned, will be our influence. What will it be like? Will it be like that of the young man whose dying prayer was, "Bury my influence with me"? That will be an absolute impossibility.