

A NOBLE LIFE

"Now there was in Joppa a certain disciple named Tabitha, which by interpretation is called Dorcas: this woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did."

— Acts 9:36

There are stories that are more thrilling and more charming than this one, but none of them weaves into it more primal elements, and none of them comes nearer analyzing life for us.

In the town of Joppa there lived a woman whose constant thought and ambition were to live a life of practical helpfulness to her neighbors. We know very little about her except what is written in this chapter, but there is enough woven into this story to entitle her to a place among the great. This wise and noble lady seems to have been the first woman who was inspired by Christ to be active in such works of love as sewing for the benefit of the poor.

I. Her life.

1. Her name was beautiful.

Her name was "Tabitha", "Dorcas," or "Gazelle." The ancients frequently went to the animals for names. A bold man was compared to a lion, and a beautiful woman was compared to a gazelle. The gazelle, or antelope of Judah, which was celebrated for its slender form, its graceful motions, and its fiery and beautiful eyes, was frequently employed by the Hebrews and other Orientals as a type of female loveliness. It was a popular name for women, suggesting beauty of form and feature, with gentleness of character and gracefulness of action. The name given to this noble Christian woman suggests that she was attractive and graceful.

Names are often expressions of character or incidents in life. The name of Dorcas became a synonym for loveliness of character and life. Often our names become synonyms of our conduct. Every community has its individual whose name stands for honor, kindness, charitableness, faithfulness, and kindred things. The mention of their names suggests those admirable qualities. Also, there are those whose names suggest certain weaknesses, faults, and sins. Who can hear the name "Judas" without associating it with treachery and treason? Judas may have had many good qualities, but this one bad one colored his entire life. Who can hear the name "Thomas" without associating it with doubt? It is a tradition that George Washington told the truth when his father inquired about who cut down the cherry tree. It may be nothing more than a tradition, but it has gained such currency that his name stands for truthfulness and honesty. One deed may mark a man for life. One speech may make a man immortal.

As you face life, may you find one urge in your heart or one great ambition, namely, to live so that your name will stand for things that are noble and worthwhile. Remember that back of every good work is something more important than the work, greater than any achievement is something more valuable than the achievement itself, and better than any record that any man can make is the man himself.

2. Her character was lovely.

From a sphere of beauty we pass to the sphere of knowledge. She was a disciple of Jesus Christ. Christ had been preached to her, and she had believed in Him, and had become His disciple. A disciple means that one has heard with open mind the teaching of a scholar, has given considerable thought to the merits of those teachings, and after a season of thought, has accepted them and proceeds to proclaim them. Real discipleship has never come easy; it has never been cheap. Discipleship is based on thought, conviction, courage and action.

Dorcas was not ashamed or afraid to let the world know that she had accepted Jesus as her Saviour and enthroned Him as her Lord, even though it was not popular then to be a disciple of Jesus. How her Christian character must have heightened the charms of her personality! What an unearthly dignity it gave to her bearing! What an angelic expression it gave to her countenance! What a magic fascination it gave to her spirit and her words!

3. Her life was useful.

The life of Dorcas was so good, so sympathetic, so true, and so useful that she was nicknamed "that lovely woman." She was "full of good works and almsdeeds which she did." Her Christian activity displayed itself especially in the making of garments for poor widows, many of whose husbands had been lost at sea. She probably purchased the material with her own savings, wove it with her own hands, and fashioned it into articles of wearing apparel with her own labor, so that the coats and garments she distributed, besides being a valuable gift of her charity, were substantial tokens of her industry as well.

Dorcas did not live to herself. Her energies were spent in the interest of others. What her condition in life was, we do not know. We suppose that she belonged to the middle class of people, the one between the poverty and riches, but of the use she made of her time, talents, and means we are fully informed. She was engaged in administering to the needs of the poor, and particularly in making garments for them. The poor were constantly in her thoughts as she worked for them.

Dorcas saw an opportunity for service on the very street where she lived. She did not have to go away to some strange land to find a place of large and useful service, but it was right at her door. Some of us think opportunities for service and greatness are better away from home, but she gave herself where she lived. She did not wait for some great public deed to publish her noble soul. In fact, she cared nothing for greatness as such, but was busy doing the little things that were found on every hand to be done. She was willing to serve and be forgotten, but such service is never forgotten. Before one is aware of it his little kindnesses will weave themselves into a garment of glory. Multitudes are willing to do great things, but are unwilling to do the little things. Such people can never be great. Greatness comes in doing little things in a great way, and he who is unwilling to do the little things in the right spirit will never achieve the ability nor the opportunity to do great things.

Some people are anxious to do something, but they cannot find anything to do. Fortunate is the man who has trained his eyes to see opportunities when they come. The man who can see the unseen is the man who will succeed. What is the difference between the average man and the junk man? The junk man sees a fortune in what others consider valueless and throw away. He comes down our alleys and to our back doors gathering up the rubbish which we have cast aside, and from these cast-off things he makes his living and builds his fortune. The difference is in what one is able to see. For ages the Niagara Falls flowed over that fearful precipice, a thing to be wondered at and talked about, but of no practical value to anyone. Finally, someone who could see more than others conceived the idea of harnessing a part of that wasted power. He dug a channel under the city and built his machinery over that channel, then opened it into the river above the city, thus allowing a part of the river to run under the city and turn the wheels of machinery. It was discovered that power sufficient to supply not only Niagara itself, but also many other towns and cities, was being wasted every day. The ability to see the unseen is a wonderful achievement. Until a man is able to do this he is not even a candidate for success. No artist can paint his picture unless he can see it in all its glory on the white and untouched canvas. No sculptor can carve an angel

from a stone unless he has been able to see the angel in the stone before he ever touched it. No teacher can lead his pupils to understand truths that he has not seen himself. Our world needs men and women who can see the unseen. What do you see in your environment, in your difficulties, in your handicaps, in your sorrows, in your joys, in your friends, in your opportunities, in your life? The ability to see things helps one's usefulness.

Dorcas was a useful woman. She looked into the satchel of her possibilities and saw that she did not have many talents. She realized that she was not what the world would call a gifted woman, but she had one talent which she could use for her Master. She could sew, so she decided to become a needlewoman and use her talent to the best advantage. She did not live to herself, but spent her energies in the interests of others. "This woman was full of good works and almsdeeds which she did." Her benevolence was abounding. "She was full of good works." There wasn't anything narrow in her sympathies or stinted in her charity. Wherever sickness or need were stretching out pale and piteous hands, there was always one hand ready to grasp them and lift them up. Her benevolence was practical also. What a contrast between her practical benevolence and much of the charity today. She did not spend her time idly planning how the poor of Joppa were to be relieved, but she took her needle and relieved them. She worked unostentatiously and perseveringly and made the garments for the poor widows. She did not employ others to do it for her, as is customary with many in these days, and think that she had done her duty. She used her own hands and plied the needle herself, and, for all we know, without any companions to assist and to encourage her. She immortalized herself by her practical helpfulness and neighborliness, and not by good ideas, intentions and resolutions.

Life, in its final analysis, consists in doing rather than thinking, planning and resolving. There are many who talk long and loud of what they are going to do, but they never get it done. There are still others who are always dreaming of a day when they can suddenly step out of insignificance into prominence. They fancy that the peak of glory is reached by one leap. Let me remind you that life is a stairway rising step by step and not as an elevator that ascends with one flight from the bottom to the top. There are plenty of opportunities for us to do worthwhile things. The world is waiting for people who are willing to do something.

II. Her Death.

Notwithstanding her beautiful name, lovely character and useful life, Dorcas was unable to ward off the attack of the last enemy, death, so she passed from this mortal scene, leaving behind her the memory of her saintly character and life to suggest whither she had gone. In consequence of her piety and benevolence Dorcas was much lamented. The people felt that she had died all too soon. In their grief they sent for Peter.

When Peter came to preach the funeral of Dorcas a long line of mourning friends met him, each holding some coat or garment and saying, "Look what she left me." It had not been a matter of leaving keepsakes, but it had been a custom of a useful life to render such help as was needed in the community where she lived, little thinking that such little deeds would outlive her. One's character is often unconsciously made. The garment of glory is most often woven out of the little threads of daily life that are thoughtlessly dropped along the path. A question that should never be allowed to die, and which each individual should answer for himself is, "What am I leaving behind?" Are you leaving your community a beneficent influence? Are you going to leave a record that your friends will not be ashamed of, one that they will not feel that they have to justify,

There has been an insatiable desire among men to leave something to perpetuate their names and records. For this purpose the kings of Egypt built pyramids, the monarchs of Europe established their dynasties, and handed their heritage from father to son; while certain philanthropists have built schools and endowed colleges, and still others have erected tall shafts of marble by the side of the place where they hoped they would be buried; but the most enduring monument one can leave to perpetuate his name and usefulness is a good life. What will you leave behind when you leave this world?