

THE DUTY OF MAN

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." Ecclesiastes 12:13-14.

Due to the providence and goodness of God we have been permitted to begin another year of live and service. However, there is no such thing as making an entirely new beginning. Therefore, the question we should ask ourselves really amounts to this: How much of the past shall we keep, and what proportion of new things shall we incorporate into it? What is to be the relation between the old and the new?

We have written indelibly on the old year. No earthly eradicator can remove what we have written. What we are is the sum of the years that have gone before. Much of the past is living and reproductive.

"Our deeds still travel with us from afar,
And what we have been makes us what we are."

The principles that determine our reactions today have been formed through many years.

We live in a world of continual change. New ideas, new manners of conduct and new customs are always appearing. There is a perennial conflict between those, on the one hand, who want to change everything, who run after every new thing simply because it is new, and who would like to make a bonfire of all that is old, and those who, on the other hand, cling closely to the old ways and look upon every new thing with suspicion. We need both the old and the new. If without the old you are poor, it is just as true that without the new you die. Old treasures and new are important and valuable. We do not have to choose one or the other; we need both. We cannot cut ourselves off completely from the past, and should never impoverish ourselves by attempting to do so.

In your own life you have kept some wonderful treasures which still have the power to inspire you. You treasure memories of a happy home life in your childhood days, and they are still very precious to you. You still cherish fond memories of friends, some of whom have already passed from the scene of action. You also have memories of great experiences and you would not want to lose these golden treasures for anything. I challenge you today to bring these memories before you in review, seek to learn their lessons and to receive their message, for a right attitude towards and a proper appreciation of the past is the foundation of all progress. The voice of experience in the past can enlighten our minds in the present and provide us with enrichment for the future.

From time to time all of us need to make as careful and as full a retrospect as is possible of that measured stretch of our journey which now lies behind us. Behind each of us is a measured stretch of certainty — its joys, its sorrows, its actions, its failures and its victories — all of which are irrevocable, never to meet us again, except in the power of their influence, until that day when we stand before the Great Judge. That is why each of us would do well to lay to heart the old injunction, "Ask now of the days that are past." What is their lesson? What do they teach us? What word of guidance have they to give us concerning the unknown future?

The old year is behind us. Its record is made. That record cannot be changed. Doubtless there are many things in your record that you would like to change, some things of which you are ashamed and other things that you have left undone, which you regret. The old year is gone and your record stands for good or bad, for weal or woe, to shame you or to honor you, as the case may be. No matter how hard you try to justify it or attempt to change it, it remains the same. You would do well to remember the true statement which a bright little boy made to his playmate. The latter was on the scales and he was very anxious to outweigh his buddy, so he puffed out his cheeks and swelled

up like a frog. In derision the wiser boy said, "Otho, that doesn't do any good, you can only weigh what you are." How truly he spoke!

Whatever you did in 1963 is done, and you can never rewrite the story. The old year is beyond recall, with all of its disappointments, discouragements, mistakes, failures, as well as its encouragements, victories, accomplishments and joys, and you must abide by the consequences of your living during it. At the close of each year we always undertake a certain amount of stocktaking will be followed by an accurate appraisal of self, a heart-to-heart talk with self, and then the making of some good resolutions and important adjustments. Occasionally somebody makes the remark, "I am not going to make any resolutions this year. I did not keep those I made last year, so there is no use making any more." That is strange logic indeed. It is as foolish as if one said, "I lost my way and got on the wrong road, so I am not going to turn around and go back for fear I shall get lost again." The remedy for broken resolutions is not a refusal to make any more, but rather the determination never again to be diverted from your endeavor to attain the highest and the best.

At the threshold of 1964 we are touched by the spirit which was expressed by Louise Fletcher Tarkington in the first stanza of her poem entitled:

"THE LAND OF BEGINNING AGAIN"

"I wish there were some wonderful place,
Called the Land of Beginning Again,
Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches,
And all our poor selfish grief,
Could be dropped, like a shabby old coat at the door,
And never put on again."

A Scottish minister once preached on the subject, "Hats Off To The Past, Coats Off To the Future." That is simply one way of saying that we should rejoice over the victories of the past, that we should make use of all that we can of the past, and that we should plunge into the future with a determination to work harder and to accomplish more than ever before. The reason we have not risen to higher heights is that we have been content to remain in the lowlands.

No one is striving after the best things who is not intent upon an upward and a forward movement continually. While the circular movement is necessary in our routine work and daily tasks, even in this treadmill round there should be constant progress. While we must do many of the same things every day, we should do them a little better with each repetition. As J. R. Miller once said,

"Speak a shade more kindly than the year before;
Pray a little oftener; love a little more;
Cling a little closer to the Father's love;
Thus life below shall grow more like the life above."

"Happy New Years!" This is the wish that all of us make for you, but we cannot give it to you. It is a good wish to make and to cherish, but trying to bring its fulfillment in your life is better than the mere wishing. It takes much more than a wish to make a happy year; it takes a will. All of us could be far happier if we were really determined to be. Happiness does not depend so much on the kind of things we shall encounter during the year as on the angle from which we look at them, the light in which we view them and the way in which we take them. Facing the fact, the fear, the force and the fascination of the future, we go forth on a great adventure into the days and the ways that are unknown. Only God knows what new discoveries, what glorious opportunities and what solemn obligations await us. The fascination of the new year is enshrined in the

plenitude, the power and the purpose of our inexhaustible God and His unsearchable riches.

Although I cannot give you happiness, I can share with you some principles and rules for obtaining it. Many have already travelled over the road on which you now find yourself, and they have left with us the wisdom which life distilled for them.

Among those who have done so is Solomon, the wisest man of the Old Testament era. Never man had such a chance as Solomon. The world seemed to spread its treasures at his feet. It lavished on him all its luxuries and delights. From his writings we learn that he had everything material that fancy could prompt or heart could desire. With an intelligence amounting to genius and a wisdom that has never been equalled, this student, philosopher and man of extraordinary versatility tapped every conceivable resource of happiness. He tried to find out wherein lay man's highest good, and how he could utilize to the best advantage his allotted time on earth. His purpose was to find out first-hand what is "good for man to do all the days of his life." He used the scientific method and experimented with life. He found out by trial and error what is good for man. Using his kingly freedom he tested life to see what was worth while.

Solomon tried the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom on the purely human level, to see if enduring satisfaction lay in that quest. In this he was wonderfully successful, for he won for himself the name of being the wisest who had ever lived. Most people would have thought that was quite a success. But what did Solomon think and say about it? He said, "And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that have been before me in Jerusalem: yea, my heart had great experience of wisdom and knowledge I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow" (Ecclesiastes 1:13, 16-18).

Then Solomon tried "madness and folly" to see if enduring satisfaction lay in that direction. Throwing all restraints aside, he plunged into a life of dissipation. But the life of the libertine was one of vanity also. Solomon next went in for great works. He built mansions and planted vineyards, laid out gardens and parks in which he planted all kinds of trees and made irrigation systems to water them, bought slaves, amassed his fortunes and employed entertainers. Did Solomon find satisfaction in that kind of life? No; he did not. Here is what he said about it: "Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun" (2:11).

After searching everywhere under the sun for "that which is good for men to practice all the days of his life," Solomon said, "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." He had discovered that he had been looking in the wrong places for enduring satisfaction. Consequently, Solomon emphasized that the duty of every man is to fear God and to keep His commandments. Fearing God is the inward principle and keeping His commandments is the outward practice.

From Solomon and others we learn two things about the happiness which all of us desire and hope to acquire.

1. Happiness comes from within.

Happiness cannot be derived from external circumstances. We know people who have everything that one could desire, so far as external circumstances are concerned, but they are bored, frustrated and unhappy. Happiness does not depend upon what one has, but on what one is. You cannot be happy in this new year unless your inward spirit is right.

Henry van Dyke's familiar lines suggest a splendid ideal for the new years:

"Four things a man must learn to do
If he would make his record true;
To think without confusion, clearly;
To love his fellowmen sincerely;
To act from honest motives purely;
To trust in God and heaven securely."

When John Ruskin, the famous English writer, was asked to tell the things that had helped to make his life such a happy one, and his character such a noble example of the things that are true and good, his reply was that the secrets of whatever happiness and usefulness had been his lay in the three things which had been instilled in him by his mother, namely, peace of conscience, obedience to authority and faith in God.

Happiness is found only in a conscience that is "void of offense toward God and toward men." Peace of conscience is never found by trampling under foot the rights of others in order that gain may accrue unto ourselves. We must have a right attitude toward others and consider their welfare equally with our own if we are ever to enjoy peace of conscience. In like manner, the happy life is dependent upon obedience to parental authority, to civil authority and to divine authority. No life can ever be truly happy unless and until it is buttressed by a sturdy faith in God and faith in people.

2. Happiness is a by-product.

In parts of Africa they have the custom of asking every chief for his life motto. One old chief asked a missionary for his motto. The missionary replied. "Love the Lord with all thy heart." Then when the missionary asked the chief for his motto he replied slowly and reverently, "When you pass through the jungle be very careful to break a twig, that the next man can find his way."

The best and most abiding satisfactions of life are always connected with the occasions when you help somebody else. Happiness is found especially through doing good to others. Selfishness and happiness are never found in the same person. Selfish people are always seeking for happiness, but they never find it; whereas, unselfish people enjoy happiness, but never seek it. The new year will afford each of us golden opportunities to be helpful to others. In order that we may be of maximum helpfulness to others let us carry with us the important traits of faith, hope and love. Have faith in God, faith in others and faith in yourself. Faith is the dynamo that starts us, and hope is the power that will keep us going. Hope for others, hope for the world and hope for yourself. Henry Drummond called love "the greatest thing in the world." When the poet Whittier was dying the watchers at his bed noticed that he was trying to say something. Bending low, they heard him say, "Give my love to the world." We all need more love. Be generous with your love, for it will bring sunshine and cheer into hearts that are lonely and cheerless.