

PRICELESS OPPORTUNITIES

"As we therefore have opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith." Galatians 6:10.

Have you ever thought of the meaning of the word "opportunity"? In its quite literal significance it means something either "outside the harbor" or "in front of the door." You have the picture, either of the ship with sails unfurled, riding at anchor, ready to start upon her unknown voyage, with just a moment to spare to catch her before the sails are bent; or the picture of a veiled figure standing for an instant at the door of one's life, knocking with sharp, swift strokes, then, if no answer comes, passing away into the darkness, refusing to be recalled. That is opportunity. These are the two figures this word created when it first came into common speech. While I am speaking to you, let us keep before our minds this picture of the figure at the door -- opportunity knocking like a wayfarer at the door of a man's life. Concerning our priceless opportunities, I should like to emphasize four things: --

I. The Sources Of Them.

In some parts of the world, as soon as a girl is married she makes a fine muslin bag. In it she gathers rose leaves. Year after year they are added to until, perhaps, she is an old woman. Then, when she dies, that bag of rose leaves is the beautiful and fragrant pillow on which her head lies in the coffin.

It is possible for us to gather the rose leaves of tender ministries, unselfish sacrifices, brave actions, and loving deeds for Christ's sake, year after year. We can crowd into our lives the lovely, unselfish, and helpful things that we may show our love to Christ. Then at last our deeds will rest on something more fragrant than rose leaves, the fragrant memories of good deeds, sweet to ourselves, sweet to others, and approved by our Lord.

One Roman Emperor would sometimes sigh at the end of a day: "Friends, I have lost a day." He regarded a day on which he had not shown kindness to anyone as one that was wasted.

But how do we get these opportunities of doing good? Can those of us whose lives are filled by "the daily round, the common task" find anything really great to do? Mr. Gladstone, The British Prime-minister, wrote: "As you grow older, you will find more and more how full the world and our lives are of opportunity, and how impossible it is that unless by our own fault, they should seem to present a blank." Similarly, to one who sighed for opportunities, Clara Barton said: "My dear, we all tumble over opportunities for being brave and doing good at every step we take. Life is just made up of such opportunities."

In a little bakery the baker had seven sons. One by one six of the brothers grew up to take their share of the work in the bakery. They agreed that the seventh, still a boy, should have his chance. He began his education at the village school. It was a struggle to pay the modest fee. When he was fourteen, his six brothers decided that he must go to Edinburgh and attend the University. They worked almost night and day to see him through his medical course. Soon, as a young doctor, he had a huge practice and became a professor. The brothers were toil-worn but supremely happy. Jamie was doing well.

The young surgeon found operations without any anaesthetic to be intensely painful and the agonies of the patients were more than he could bear. He must find some way of easing their pain. He said, "I thought of nothing else all the time." At last he discovered and perfected the use of chloroform. Honors were showered upon him. The world spoke of Sir James Simpson with deepest respect. Presently through the strong faith and personal evangelism, he healed souls as well as bodies.

The six brothers had slaved in the humble bakery, unknown to the world, yet they had helped to heal multiplied thousands. Their responsibility became their opportunity.

II. The Stimulant Of Them.

Many of us would much rather be left alone to take life as it comes than to be constantly reminded of the opportunities that so often, alas, slip away unused. Into so many lives there comes sooner or later a dull apathy of soul that simply hates to be aroused from its lethargy of routine. To speak of opportunity to such men, and to tell them that every day brings with it a fresh chance to make one richer, is to irritate and annoy the placid selfishness of their souls. For, after all, opportunity is the great stimulant of life. To be indifferent to opportunity means that you are lying stagnant in the dead waters of life, where the great currents never come and the winds of energy are never felt.

The practical question is not whether or not you are making the most of your opportunities, but whether you are conscious of them at all, whether, in fact, they convey any stimulus to your powers. Too often, alas, it is with many of us as George Eliot has put it with such tragic pathos: "The golden moments in the stream of life rush past us, and we see nothing but sand." The angels come to visit us, and we only know them when they are gone." We become what we ought to be in proportion to the measure that we do good in some other soul.

The first great field of opportunity is the home. As the twig is bent, the tree will likely grow. Each recurring day presents opportunities for the parents to practice and teach in the home. Happy the father and mother who never miss an opportunity to magnify Christ in the home. Blessed the father or mother who can take the child alone, and tell him of the Christ and His love. Parents lose a God-given opportunity who fail to lead their children to the Lord.

The business and social worlds also present countless opportunities for Christian service. Innumerable opportunities for doing good present themselves in the church. Happy the Christian who has the spiritual instinct to discern and the grace to use the opportunities which he has.

III. The Seizure Of Them.

Unfortunately, there are those who fail to seize their opportunities, but murder them instead. Saul, the first king of Israel, deliberately

wasted life's opportunities. What an unexpected guest, and laden with what boundless possibilities, was that which came knocking at the door of his life that way when he found himself listening to an opportunity that summoned him away from the farm and to a throne. Yet Saul murdered that opportunity, as hundreds and thousands today are murdering their opportunity, by claiming as a right what he ought to have held as a duty; by demanding that which God had given him as a trust as his own private possession, to do with as he pleased. Saul murdered that which would have crowned him with immortal blessing.

Others have since done that. To the doors of people around us today God has sent the angel of opportunity, and they have admitted the guest. They have said, "Show me what you have got for me; open the bundle of your blessings!" Then, when the wealth, influence, and power which opportunity has brought are theirs, they have murdered it and buried the skeleton in the basement of their lives. They say, "These things--wealth, influence and power are mine to do with as I please." Upon the altar of sordid ambition and personal greed they are pouring out the gifts of opportunity that God had sent to make life sweeter and the world better than they found it.

Can we find an example of anyone using every available opportunity to helping others? Yes; Christ is that example. As Peter said, "He went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). Christ said, "I must work the works of him that sent me, while it is day: the night cometh when no man can work" (John 9:4). He also said: "My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work" (John 4:34). This was the guiding principle of His life. His recorded words were: "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). Until the very last He kept Himself to that principle.

So completely did this attitude characterize His life that when the time of His crucifixion arrived He could say: "I have glorified thee on earth. I have finished the work thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4). As our lives are filled by His spirit they will be, like His, filled with blessings for others. Our ability may be limited, our time may be little, and our influence may be tiny, Yet God is able to give us priceless opportunities of doing good which will use that limited ability, that little time, and that tiny influence.

The tongue can utter words of love, sympathy, kindness, and encouragement. Sometimes a word carefully chosen and lovingly spoken is all that can be done and all that needs to be done. John Morel, Mayor of Darlington in England, was passing through the town and met a fellow-citizen who had just been released from jail, where he had served three years for embezzlement. In a cheery tone the mayor said, "Hello! I'm glad to see you! How are you?" Afterwards he met this man in another town. The latter immediately said: "I want to thank you for what you did for me when I came out of prison." "What did I do?" "You spoke a kind word to me, and it changed my life," was the unexpected reply.

Some miss their golden opportunities. Dickens immortalized this type of fiction in the familiar figure of Micawber, who was always waiting for something to turn up, and always missing it when it did. This is

the man who seems to have been born into the world a day too late, and who has spent his whole life in a vain effort to catch up. He has always been just too late for the opportunity that should have brought him fame and fortune.

A picture of this man is outlined in the Book of Kings, where the prophet, describing the loss of a certain prisoner of war, adds, "While thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone." That is it. It is the preoccupation with other trivial things that makes so many men miss the great opportunities of life. They are busy here and there, and when opportunity comes knocking at their doors, they are so immersed in trifles that do not amount to anything that their ears are deaf to the knocking, until at last, when they get around to open the door, it is only to grumble at what they suppose is a runaway knock. But the opportunity is gone.

Fortunately, there are those who seize their priceless opportunities as they pass. They are ready to welcome and to turn to good account each new opportunity that comes. The alert and successful man does not make any parade of his abilities, nor does he go out of his way to start new projects. He simply has the faculty of recognizing the opportunity which has a message for him, as it passes in the procession of circumstances and throng of events.

There is a more rare and much bigger type of character in the man who makes his discouragements and disappointments elements of a higher success. Failure becomes a spur to activity, and out of defeat he spells the secret of a worthier victory. When the news came to Walter Scott that through failure of his publishers he was on the verge of bankruptcy, and that the stately home he had built must pass from him into other hands, that very morning he wrote to a friend: "I feel neither dishonored nor broken down by the news I have received. I have walked for the last time in the domain which I have planted, sat for the last time in the halls I have built. But death would have taken me if misfortune had spared me." He closed by saying that "adversity is to him a tonic and a bracer." From that moment Scott began to build up his undying influence in English literature.

IV. The Shortness Of Them.

We do well to remember the brevity of our opportunities. Paul wrote: "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good." He also wrote: "But this I say, brethren, the time is short" (I Corinthians 7:29).

Opportunities fly past very rapidly, but, if we are wise, we shall seize them and make the most of them. Middle life and old age are too late to lay the foundation of education which should be laid in childhood and youth. The constitution which is ruined in early life is damaged beyond complete repair. Spring is the time to sow. If we do not sow then, we shall not be able to reap the harvest. In youth the hours are full of privileges. They come holding rich treasures sent to us from God, but, if we are occupied with our own little trifles and do not receive them, they will quickly pass on and never return. Moments come to us but once; whatever we do with them we must do as they pass, for they will never come to us again. Many are waiting for

opportunities, and wondering why they never come to them, when really they have been passing by, unrecognized and unaccepted. Opportunities come to all of us every day, but the trouble with so many of us is that we let them pass by and fail to utilize them. The real ghosts of life are those of neglected or wasted opportunities. Any longing for a second chance, after a priceless opportunity has been lost, is entirely in vain. As John James Ingalls wrote:

"Master of human destinies am I.
Fame, love, and fortune on my footsteps wait.
Cities and fields I walk, I penetrate
Deserts and seas remote, and passing by
Hovel and mart, and palace soon or late
I knock unbidden once at every gate!"

If sleeping, wake--if feasting, rise before
I turn away. It is the hour of fate,
And they who follow me reach every state
Mortals desire, and conquer every foe
Save death; but those who doubt or hesitate
Condemned to failure, penury, and woe,
Seek me in vain and uselessly implore--
I answer not, and I return no more."

Priceless opportunities never come again. That is why it was written,

"Of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest of these--it might have been."

One great advantage following our using every opportunity to the full will be that when it has passed we shall not have any regrets. A little girl approached the lifeless form of her grandfather and taking his cold hand exclaimed: "Dear grandpa, you know I was always good to you while you lived." It is worth more than a world to be able to say that, for it will give a lifetime of joy.

At this very moment our opportunities are magnificent and priceless. It is not too late for us to use them for the highest and best. "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). God is as good as ever. Christ is as wise and loving as ever. We are living in a day of great and priceless opportunity. God is giving us a day in which we can work as well as a night in which we cannot work. Let us make John Wesley's rule for his life our own! It was as follows: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."