

MAKING LIFE COUNT

"Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

These words were addressed first to a group of Jewish Christians who had discovered that the Christian life was much more difficult than they had expected. They were being persecuted and robbed of their goods. There were bitter foes without and within. Some of them were greatly discouraged, even wondering if they had made a mistake in becoming Christians. Some were looking back wistfully to the old life and wondering if they should renounce Christianity, and abandon their high aims and great hopes. To keep them from turning back, and to encourage them to go forward without hesitation, this message was recorded, urging them to refuse to lose courage and to hold fast their profession.

Not only did these verses lay upon them the importance and the necessity of their being loyal to the Christian faith, but they contained some very definite and helpful directions for the living of the Christian life. They were told how they might make life count in the finest fashion. The directions that were given to them are just as pertinent and relevant in this twentieth century as they were in the first. Therefore, we would do well to listen to this instruction as to how to make life count, or how to make a success of the greatest of all enterprises, the enterprise of Christian living.

He makes life count for the most who spends it for something that outlasts life itself. Many people are foolish enough to think that life owes them peace, freedom from suffering, comfort, prosperity, and happiness. Thinking that this is their due, they are rebellious when some disappointment comes. But, the truth of the matter is, we come into life as debtors, and not as creditors. We are under obligation to life.

Think for a moment what it costs to produce, nurture, and prepare a life for this world. The first thing involved is the infinite wisdom of God. After this comes the suffering of a mother in giving birth to a baby. Then there are years of parental toil, sacrifice, and the expenditure of a considerable amount of money. It is estimated that it costs more than thirty-two thousand dollars to bring a boy to maturity and prepare him for life. His rearing and education through the eighth grade will cost four thousand eight hundred dollars. An additional three thousand two hundred dollars are needed to meet his expenses through high school. His college education will cost an additional six thousand dollars. Added to this must be the sum expended by the community and nation for his protection. This brings the total cost to society for the bringing of a boy to manhood to thirty-two thousand dollars. This means that he starts out in life with a debt of thirty-two thousand dollars to his parents and society for life and its opportunities, to say nothing of his inestimable debt to God for the gift of life itself. Who then dares to say that life owes anyone a living? Beyond this computed monetary cost are the moral and spiritual obligations which put us in debt to God Who has both created and redeemed us. If these are seriously and purposefully considered, we are left in debt, and are committed to making life a meaningful experience.

But what can anyone do to discharge his debt and put life on the credit side of the eternal ledger? How can anyone know that when he has lived his life-span, however

short or long it may be, he has made the most of life? To begin with, making life count, or making the most of life, is living beyond the ordinary things of eating, making money, enjoying pleasure, and indulging one's desires. It is giving more than one receives. It is leaving a living memorial in the lives of other redeemed people. It is doing the will of God. Making life count, or making the most of life, is living for something that outlasts our physical existence.

The Epistle to the Hebrews teaches us that being a Christian is a strenuous matter. It is an exacting business. It does not conceal the facts with reference to the life that counts. It does not tell its readers that to be a Christian is the easiest way to get through life. It does not make any appeal to their cowardice or to their love of ease. Rather, it appeals to the heroic. Following Christ involves running a race and engaging in a life-long conflict.

Unfortunately, many Christians carry a lot of excess baggage in the form of doubtful habits, trifling interests, and second-best activities. Christians have entered a race and started for a goal. If they are to reach that goal and win the prize, they must lay aside whatever hinders speed, retards progress, and impairs efficiency. Anything that would tend to rob Christ of the first place in your life, rob you of the reality of His presence and the sweetness of His fellowship, injure your Christian influence, mar your testimony, or grieve the Holy Spirit, constitutes a weight that you should cast aside. If you are carrying the excess baggage of a suspicious attitude, a critical spirit, a jealous feeling, an irritable temper, an unforgiving spirit, or evil habits, you cannot run the Christian race, you cannot make the most of life, and you cannot make your life count for that which is worthwhile. Do not harbor anything in your heart or life that would hinder you from running the Christian race successfully and gloriously. Trusting Christ as your Saviour, leaning upon Him for your strength, and copying Him as your example, you can run the Christian race victoriously. As you do so, you shall find yourself improving, your heart becoming more joyful, your life more useful, your pathway more glorious, and your prospects more wonderful.

In order to establish a partnership between Himself and His creatures, God set man to work. He said: "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Genesis 1:28). In doing this God did not hand man a pre-fabricated environment without need of thought and labor. There is no automatic docility in the animal kingdom, or automatic prosperity in the vegetable kingdom, or leisure in the human kingdom. It is necessary for man to achieve this dominion and multiplication by working for it. When we pass from the Old Testament economy to the New Testament economy, we are confronted with the commandment of service and the symbols of labor, and told to go to work.

The parables of our Lord are particularly impressive in this respect for they speak of fields, vineyards, harvest fields, and fishing waters. Christ spoke of Christians as sowers, husbandmen, laborers, and fishermen. He taught His disciples to pray a workman's prayer: "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth laborers into his harvest" (Matthew 9:37-38).

In what capacities is a Christian to work in order to make life count for the most?

I. He Is To Work For God.

The Bible says: "For we are laborers together with God" (I Corinthians 3:9).

Life is a divine-human partnership. Christians are in business with God. God furnishes the capital in terms of life, power, inspiration, and purpose; while Christians furnish the channel and expression through which God's work is done.

Someone has explained responsibility as the combination of "response" and "ability." When we compound these words in Christian action we create and discharge response by our response to God's ability.

When Christ Jesus first appeared on the earthly scene to fulfill His mission, He received a scoffing, sneering, jeering greeting. His fellowmen asked, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth" (John 1:46). Nazareth was the backwoods of Galilee. Surely no good thing ever came from Nazareth. But those detractors and impugnors failed to recognize that the Lord Jesus really did not come from Nazareth, but from God. Nazareth was the junction point between heaven and earth. Here He changed the robes of deity for the robes of flesh. No matter where we have come from; how lowly our identity; how unimpressive our record; if we, like Christ, date the beginning of life's work with God and not ourselves, with heaven and not ourselves, with heaven and not Nazareth, we will be able to make life count for the most.

II. He Is To Work For Others.

One cannot travel through the Bible lands without being impressed with the difference between the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee. The Sea of Galilee has an outlet and an overflow in the Jordan River while the Dead Sea does not have an outlet. The life with an outlet of Christian service is the living, thriving life. But the life that is confined to selfishness is full of the lifeless elements of stagnation. It is like the scum-covered pool that does not give any of its life to others -- nothing lives in it or from it.

By service for others we do not mean a degrading charity doled out to erstwhile parasites, which only makes them more irresponsible than they were before. This does not help anyone. If one is going to help another, the best kind of help he can give is to help the recipient to help himself. What is meant here is redemptive service.

Our Lord said: "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." The life-work of every disciple of Christ is redemptive service -- bringing someone else to Christ. We have daily avocations, but our primary vocation is bringing displaced persons into fellowship with God. Our real mission is to reproduce after our kind, and to bring others into the family of God.

We work for others by praying for them. We work for others by witnessing to them. We work for others by teaching them the will and the way of the Lord. We work for others by serving their needs in times of stress, sorrow, and want; and thus build those relations of love that better our human existence.

III. He Is To Work For Himself.

If you would make life count, you must build upon the foundation which is furnished in Christ. Upon this foundation, the Christian worker builds with materials which, in their quality and durability, are represented by the figures of gold, silver, and precious stones; or wood, hay, and stubble. Some day your

labor will come under the scrutiny of the great Masterbuilder and He will test its reality, durability, and value. Then the builder who used the imperishables of gold, silver, and precious stones will be approved, while the builder who used the perishables of wood, hay, and stubble will suffer the loss of his labor. The two classes of materials represent, in the imperishables, the spiritual and eternal things; and, in the perishables, the material and earthly things.

The sources of the wise worker's life and labor are the spiritual elements of faith, prayer, and worship. These are the energy-producing factors which give him his strength and stamina. If a given amount of energy is to be expended, an equivalent amount of energy-producing elements must be taken in. This is why we cannot make life count for the most apart from faith, prayer, and worship. In these spiritual exercises, we take in energy-creating elements that enable us to give out productive labor.

A worker's equipment requires tools, blueprints, instructions, rules, and standards. These the Christian worker finds in the Bible. God's Word is our rule of faith and practice. It is our implement of spiritual service. It is the food that creates spiritual energy. It is the source of our inspiration.

Beyond these things the life-worker needs ideals to guide him and to determine the quality of his life-service. There is the ideal of righteousness. Whatever he does and however he works, it will be by the standard of what is right. There is also the ideal of faithfulness. It is to labor for the sake of labor and not merely for the sake of reward. It is life for the sake of life and not merely for the sake of gain. It is God for the sake of God and not merely for God's gifts.

Then there is the ideal of sacrifice. Living is a costly experience. It is based upon the principle of sacrifice. The lower must always sacrifice itself for the higher. We cannot make the most of life unless we are willing to give the utmost to life. Many people are like the man who "had the gold fever but lacked the digging principle."

Finally, there is incentive for the Christian worker. The greatest incentive for life is not material gain expendable only in time. It is something beyond this, with dividends for time and principle intact for eternity. The greatest incentive for a proper life is divine approval. It will be worth every sacrifice we make, every hardship we endure, and every cross we bear to hear our Lord say: "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Matthew 25:21).