

LIVING A DAY AT A TIME

Matthew 6:34

"Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (Matthew 6:34).

On April 20, 1913, a world-renowned physician addressed the student body at Yale University in the United States. His name was Sir William Osler and at that time he was the Regius Professor of Medicine at Oxford. Not only was he the author of the greatest standard medical textbook of his day, but by his teaching and example he had raised the practice of medicine on two continents to a new level of dignity and service. Osler was no mere technician, pre-eminent in his own field and ignorant of all others. He was a truly educated man, a lover of English literature and a philosopher in his own right. He was also an intensely human man, full of fun, keenly interested in people, never forgetting a face or a name, and finding his chief delight in playing with little children and writing letters to them. How could any man crowd into a single day such a wide range of activities, contributing so much to his main job and still finding ample time to play and read and think and love and rest?

Osler had a secret. He called it his philosophy of life, and it was that philosophy which he shared with the students at Yale—the practice of "living in day-tight compartments." Said Osler, "Throw away all ambition beyond that of doing the day's work well. The travelers on the road to success live in the present, heedless of taking thought for the morrow. Live neither in the past nor in the future, but let each day absorb your entire energies and satisfy your widest ambition."

Many people have tried to be governed by Osler's philosophy of living in day-tight compartments, finding that they could manage life successfully so long as they were content to manage it one day at a time. Their motive for doing so has been nothing less than Christian obedience. In his Sermon on the Mount, which distills the highest wisdom ever communicated to man, God's own blueprint of human life, Jesus said quite specifically; "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." Here is Christian teaching of the most down-to-earth kind, a practical philosophy of life which each one of us can make his own and which, in obedience to Christ, we must make our own.

Many are overwrought, tense, distracted, anxious, and worried because they have never mastered the art of living a day at a time. Physically we do live a day at a time. But, mentally too many of us live in all three tenses at once—past, present, and future. People crack up, not because the strains and problems of life are too great, but because they are carrying a triple load. They are lagging about the burdens of the past, the burdens of today, and the anticipated burdens of tomorrow. And, as Dr. Osler said, "The load of tomorrow, added to that of yesterday, carried today, makes the strongest falter. We must learn to shut off the future as tightly as the past."

Where do we go from here? Obviously, we cannot stay where we are, for life is like riding a bicycle: either you go on or you go off. If you are going to live as you should, and to make the most out of life, you must learn to live a day at a time, as Christ has taught us. If you are going to live a day at a time, there are some things which you must do. Among them are the following:

I. Stop Living In the Past.

The ability to recall the past distinguishes man from the lower animals. What

would life be without memory, the mind's treasure-house of rich experiences, the cord which binds all our yesterdays to the present? Again and again God says to His people, "Remember!" He says "Remember the days of old." "Remember now thy creator in the days of thy youth." Our Lord Himself sanctified this tender and noble faculty of man when He instituted the Lord's Supper as a mystical link between the past and the present, and said: "This do in remembrance of me."

The philosopher Bergson wrote, "It is the function of the brain to enable us not only to remember but to forget." Our trouble is that we forget what ought to be remembered, and remember what ought to be forgotten. Many of us have never learned how to forget "those things which are behind." This is something that we all need to do.

It is such a temptation for us to use up our powers living over the past, and regretting old mistakes, shortcomings, and decisions; and, when we do, we have so little strength left to grapple with the insistent problems and tasks immediately before us. Let us never be intimidated by the disappointments and defeats of the past. These things happened yesterday. Mulling over the mistakes of yesterday paralyzes the efforts of today. Excessive regret over the blunders of the past freezes our energies, and wholly unfits us for radiant and effective living in the present.

Some of us need to give ourselves a good talking-to about living in the past. We need to say to ourselves, "The past is gone—utterly and irretrievably gone." It is now completely beyond our control. Not all the regrets and tears on earth can change the slightest part of it. That is why we need to stop senseless and useless worry about the past, and muster all our strength for living in the present and in the future. In the closing scene of Shakespeare's *THE TEMPEST*, Prospero says to Alonzo: "Let us not burden our remembrances with a heaviness that's gone." That is excellent advice, and increasingly we must learn to follow it.

Some of us need to conduct a funeral service and bury our past. In one grave we might bury our failures, the blunders we have made in the home, at work, and in the presence of our friends, which we still try to rationalize or for which we still punish ourselves.

Memory becomes a curse when it retains only things which are gloomy, discouraging and depressing. We are all too prone to dwell upon the painful and unhappy experiences of life. We allow one cloudy day to discourage us to such an extent that it robs us of the memory of many glorious days of sunshine. We permit some distasteful experience, which has occupied but a relatively small portion of our lives, to overshadow all the blessed and happy experiences of life.

When we carry in our minds and in our hearts the disappointments, failures, and unhappy moments of life, we become pessimistic and cynical. Unhappy ourselves, we become the joy-killers for our friends and associates. Continually pondering over the dull, drab things of life finally poisons our entire system so that everything becomes distorted and discolored. So, forget the unkind, discouraging, and depressing things of life, but treasure up in your memory the fine, the true, the noble, and the good things.

There should also be a grave for our successes, because if these figure too

largely in our minds they will be impediments instead of incentives, stumbling-blocks instead of stepping-stones. In another grave we might bury our annoyances, the insults and injuries from other people which our minds have now magnified out of all proportion and turned into a major neurosis. The last grave would be reserved for our sorrows—not the sense of bereavement,—but the morbid, introspective self-pity that makes us intolerable to ourselves and embarrassing to everyone else.

Let us never be intimidated by the defeats and disappointments of the past. These things happened yesterday. Today is a new day, and God gives us a new day every twenty-four hours. George Herbert said, "Undress your soul at night, shedding as you do your garments the sins of omission and commission, and you will waken in the morning a free man with a new life." That is the secret of living a day at a time. Bury the past. "Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

II. Stop Living In The Future.

Of course, this does not mean that we should cease anticipating the future altogether. We had better make some provision for the future, else we shall eventually be a burden on our families or upon public charity. Faith and hope find their fulfillment only in the future. Some of us are engaged in long-range tasks, and only as we look far into the future and see their completion does our present labor have significance, inspiration, and satisfaction.

Christ was not counseling us to be blind and improvident when He said: "Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day." He was speaking about the tendency we all have of so projecting ourselves into the future that we forget to live in the present, the tendency of allowing our hopes and fears and worries for the future to mortgage our happiness today. An eminent psychologist asked three thousand persons the question, "What are you living for?" It shocked him to discover ninety per cent simply putting up with the present while they waited for the future, waited for something to happen, waited for marriage, waited for the children to grow up and leave home, waited for someone to die, waited for retirement, waited for tomorrow while today slipped by unnoticed. They were all looking through binoculars at some beautiful scene in the distance, completely oblivious of the exquisite flower garden at their feet.

Christ has taught us not to be fearful, burdened, and anxious about tomorrow, not to expend our resources of body, mind, and spirit bearing tomorrow's burdens in advance, and solving tomorrow's problems before they arise. He forbids the terrible habit of anticipating troubles and tragedies, most of which actually never take place. Some of us are never at our best because we do not concentrate on the task or problem which is immediately before us. Our hands are busy with the present, but our minds are off tackling some situation which does not yet exist.

The best reason for not living in the future is that the future has not yet been given to us, and may never be. "Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow" (James 4:14). Leave tomorrow with God until it comes. That is what the Word of God lays upon us as a duty. No strength is given today for tomorrow. Tomorrow will bring the strength for tomorrow, and the day after will bring the strength for that day. Like Livingstone, let us pillow our heads on the old saying: Leave tomorrow's trouble to tomorrow's strength; tomorrow's work to tomorrow's time; tomorrow's trial to tomorrow's grace and tomorrow's God. His strength will be available for our weakness.

III. Sense The Urgency Of The Present.

Instead of taking the hours of the day seriously, multitudes are interested only in what they call, "putting in the time," or "killing time." A traveler in South Africa was walking by a farm when he saw one of the farmer's children playing with a rough stone. Attracted by the color and form of the stone, the traveler found it to be diamond of immense value. In like manner we play carelessly with the days and years, ignorant of their worth and forgetting how quickly they slip from our grasp. "Make the most of your time, because these are evil days." That means accepting each day as a gift from God and living it to the full, knowing that we shall never pass this way again. There is so much to be done and such a short time in which to do it.

"Lord, for tomorrow and its needs, I do not pray;
Keep me, my God, from stain of sin, just for today.
Let me both diligently work, and duly pray;
Let me be kind in word and deed, just for today.

Let me be slow to do my will, prompt to obey;
Oh, keep me in Thy loving care, just for today.
Let me no wrong or idle word, unthinking say;
Set Thou a seal upon my lips, just for today.

Let me in season, Lord, be grave, in season, gay;
Let me be faithful to Thy grace, just for today.
So, for tomorrow and its needs I do not pray;
But keep me, guide me, love me, Lord, just for today."