

THREE WAYS OF LOOKING AT LIFE

"And as they departed, Jesus began to say unto the multitudes concerning John, What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet." Matthew 11:7-9.

It is a well-known truth that we see in life what we are looking for. The real difference between people is not so much a difference of age or wealth or rank, as a difference of outlook, disposition and character.

Our Lord saw in life what He was looking for. In one of the incidents of His ministry we read, "Walking by the sea of Galilee, He saw two brethren." An engineer might have seen something completely different; a farmer might have noticed the quality of the pasture; a business man the opportunities for trade and commerce, but Christ saw what He was looking for: "two brethren," whose discipleship He needed and valued.

We either live as we think, or think as we live. We either live by instinct or by insight, by impulse or by obligation, by desire or by duty. Perhaps that is why so many of our age and generation are unhappy and dissatisfied. Their lives are built upon sand. They do not know what they are looking for. That surely is the meaning of frustration, and no one can deny that many are frustrated. This truth Christ had in mind when He asked the multitude, concerning John the Baptist, "What went ye out into the wilderness to see?" That same question He addresses to us. What is our conception of life? What are we looking for?

In the summertime, for example, the landscape is beautiful—every breeze is laden with fragrance, every field is teeming with fertility, every tree hangs heavy with fruit. Nature, arrayed in all her loveliness, pours of her beauty and bounty into the lap of man. But if a man is cross-eyed or near-sighted, then his testimony about the summer landscape can hardly be trustworthy. The defects of his vision are damaging to his view of the landscape. Just in the same way the defects of disposition and character are damaging to one's outlook upon life.

It was this truth that we see in life what we are looking for that Christ had in mind when He asked the multitude, "What went ye out into the wilderness to see?" The implication seems to be that they might have seen what they wished. This question of our Lord is equally pertinent in our day. In the words of our text, Christ Jesus suggests three ways of looking at life.

I. The Fatalistic Way.

Christ asked, "What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind?" The fatalistic way of looking at life asserts that life is a standing in the muck where chance has placed it, powerless to oppose the powers that sway it to and fro, caught in the vagrant winds of heredity and circumstance. The fatalist believes that the human soul is an arrow shot from the bow of the cradle to the target of the grave. It is helpless to change its direction.

Our attitude towards life may be that of the fatalist. He would have us believe that we have no control over our lives and have nothing to do with determining our destiny; that we are merely reeds driven hither and thither by the winds and influence of heredity, chance and environment. Those who accept the creed of the fatalist must of necessity scorn any painstaking effort to improve themselves.

What comfort is there in the fatalistic philosophy of life? What burdens has it lifted from overwrought hearts? What tears has it dried from sorrow-stained faces? What door has it unlocked to the temple of truth, the palace of beauty, the halls of learning or the shrine of devotion.

How do you look at life? For what are you living? What is the ruling motive which gives your life direction and impulse? Where is your eye fixed? Do you really believe that life is only a reed shaken in the wind to fall at last into death and decay?

Life is a reed, but it is a reed which may be woven into a basket like that which held the infant Moses, who became the deliverer of the great Jewish nation. Life may be useful.

Life is a reed, but it is a reed which may be fashioned into a flute like that on which David played and soothed the heart of a troubled king. Life may be beautiful.

Life was a reed thrust into the hands of the despised, rejected, persecuted Jesus, but He took it and glorified it. Life may be glorious.

If only men and women today would learn to live by insight instead of instinct, by obligation instead of impulse, by duty instead of desire; then they would come to see that selfishness, pride, jealousy and hatred are short-sighted, and defeat themselves. If only men and women today would learn to live according to the way of Christ--the way of love, justice, righteousness and peace--then would they come to see that the gratification of power and passion strikes at the security of everything that is beautiful, sacred and worth-while in life.

II. The Materialistic Way.

Our Saviour said, "What went ye out to see? A man clothed in soft raiment?" This, of course, is the common and popular way of looking at life. We worship at the shrine of wealth and success. We bow down at the altar of Mammon. The world is not yet cured of the insanity which leads it to put a high estimate on riches and rank, and a much lower one on moral rectitude and spiritual excellence. The man clothed in soft raiment is envied and his possessions coveted. Human worth is estimated in cash instead of in character. But do let us remember that Christ called the man who looked at life wholly from the materialistic point of view "a fool."

Blessed is the man who uses money to make men, and not men to make money. Far better is it to have rags and a crust of bread with a pure heart that sees God than all soft raiment and sumptuous fare with a heart of stone. Love is the royal law of life, and when the instinct is harnessed to the highest end, then, and then only, will men and women find the fulfilment of life in a fellowship of service.

Are we looking at life, our own in particular, from the viewpoint of soft clothing, wealth, power and worldly success? Are we guilty of being more concerned about things than persons? Are we more interested in quantity than quality? Are we more anxious to prolong our days than to fill them with truth, nobility and worth?

III. The Spiritual Way.

"But what went ye out to see? A prophet?" This is the best way of looking at life--the spiritual way.

A prophet was a man of God. All his interests were spiritual. He maintained that without God life has no permanent meaning. He denounced fatalism as wrong and without hope. He scorned materialism as selfish, self-centered and leading to chaos and spiritual bankruptcy, knowing full well that only that which is of God will survive the test and trial of time. Is that the way we look at life? Are we putting the claims of God uppermost in our minds? Are we anxious to see in life His will and purpose for us? Are we seeking at all times opportunities to extend His Kingdom through our own actions and witnessing?

"What went ye out to see? A Prophet?" The prophet is the man of God, and when we look at life through his eyes, we shall be looking for the evidences of God's presence and the revelations of His will. We shall see that life is a trust from God to be employed to His glory and for the good of man.

Apart from God, life has no serious meaning at all. Without God, humanity is a feeble, pathetic, useless thing whose end is dust. If God has given us our lives, and He has, then there must be a purpose at the heart of life--something that will satisfy that hunger of ours that can never be appeased by material things; something that will make us stand erect in our manhood; something that will give us poise, direction and strength; something that will rid us of the sense of futility; something that will make us feel that every part of our lives is being knit into a splendid whole.

But where are we to find this something? In Jesus Christ. In Him God has set forth His pattern for life--absolute chivalry, consistency unwavering, love triumphant over evil, compassion as wide as the sea, and purity as steady as a rock. The meaning of life is Jesus Christ. Christ's way of looking at life lifts it up and glorifies it. It keeps the soul mellow with prayer, tender with love, happy in service and gracious in sympathy.