

LEARNING TO LIVE AT OUR BEST

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." Matthew 6:33.

One's view of life determines his way of living. "As a man thinks so he does." You can always tell what a man's philosophy of life is by the way in which he lives and by the way he reacts to the things that are happening around him.

Everyone who lives to maturity faces a dual problem, that of learning to live with himself and learning to live with other people. These two problems are closely related, but not until one has learned to live with himself can he live successfully with others.

The measure of success that we have in mastering ourselves will determine, to a large degree, our ability to live happily with others. The person who cannot get along with others is invariably at war with himself. His impatience, his uncontrolled temper, and his domineering ways are all projections of his own inner conflict upon other people.

Life is not an easy matter for any of us. It demands self-mastery. We must bring our own inner drives and desires under firm control. We must discipline our emotions, establish constructive habits of thoughts and of conduct, and develop self-reliance and initiative. This striving for inner unity is a tremendous task and it is lifelong in duration.

One of the characteristics of many people today is a lack of inner unity. So many have lost their bearings, and are confused as to the truth and the right. From the lips of young and old today we hear the statements: "I'm so confused. I don't know what is right and what is wrong. I don't know where the truth lies." Frequently people say, "I don't know what is the matter with me. I believe that I am going to pieces. One part of me stands aghast at what the other part of me is doing." The happier we are within ourselves, the more harmonious will be our relations with other people. Each of us, then, becomes a center of discord or of harmony. Either we are making life easier for others or we are making it much more difficult.

Most of the conflicts between people emerge from inner conflict. When we have not achieved a self we can live with, we lack a self with which others can live. We cannot know what is in a man until we see him in his relationships with others. Strained human relations are often a product of inner strife. Our greatest ignorance lies in the relation of man to man. We may be able to split the atom and to fly faster than the speed of sound, but it will avail us little if we fail to bridge the yawning chasm between man and man. Someone has written a jingle which speaks a profound truth on the matter of personal relations:

"There's a fellow in your office
Who complains and carps and whines
Till you'd almost do a favor
To his heirs and his assigns!
But I'll tip you to a secret,
And this queer chap is involved --
He's no enemy to fight with,
He's a problem to be solved."

Whenever we meet anyone who has not been able to achieve good relations with others, and who creates discord wherever he goes, we have "a problem to be solved." What a transformation would come in the human relations of any community if its people really tried to understand and to help their fellows. But that calls for a measure of self-discipline and inner peace that few possess.

A great many factors are concerned with our success in life. Some of these are beyond our control: the inheritance we have received from our ancestors, the kind of home into which we were born, the environment of our childhood — all these help to mold and to make us the way we are. Nevertheless, we are not the slaves of heredity or environment, and there still remains the true determining factor, the individual will. God gives us the power, if we will receive and use it, to make ourselves what we ought to be.

The proportion of people who really succeed in life, even in a material sense, is not large. Here are some statistics of insurance actuaries, verified for our day, on the prospects of any given one hundred young men in the United States who enter business at the age of twenty-five. Forty years later sixty-four of the hundred will still be alive and thirty-six will have died. Of the sixty-four surviving men, only ten will be financially independent; fifty-four will be dependent on charity or relatives. These facts are disconcerting, but they happen to be true, and if one could go into the individual life of each of these men, one could trace the factors that produced the failure.

Even in the area of character and personality, the proportion of genuine successes is not much larger. It is not the many, but the few, who learn to live successfully.

Why do so many people miss the straight gate that leads to true happiness, inner contentment, and the ability to live harmoniously with others? Why do they miss the abundant life?

I. Reasons For Failure.

1. They lack purpose.

Many fail in life simply because they have never made up their minds where they want to go. A person without a purpose in life is like a rudderless ship at the mercy of wind and tide. Do you have a clearly defined goal in life? Are you aiming high?

On his long journey to the New World, Columbus made one entry in his log book each night: "This day we sailed westward, which is our course." Hopes might rise and fall, the fears of the sailors might strike terror into their hearts, but Columbus knew where he wanted to go. Paul had this quality of decisiveness in him. He wrote "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14).

When one has discovered a noble purpose in life to which he can devote himself, he should dedicate and concentrate all his power of body, mind, and spirit to the accomplishment of this objective.

2. They lack the ability to see life through to a good finish.

They do not have staying power. They made a good beginning, but they did not see it through to the end. They are like the man of whom Christ spoke: "This man began to build, and was not able to finish" (Luke 14:30).

3. They do not actually try to rid themselves of their faults.

Most character or personality defects have their origin in self-centeredness. Take the hypersensitive individual, for instance. The corruption of the best is the worst. Sensitiveness can be corrupted and debased. When this occurs a person becomes touchy,

peevish, easily offended, and flies to pieces at minor irritations. He thinks that his contribution to life is never fully appreciated.

The remedy for self-centeredness is to put self out of the center of life and enthrone God's will there. Ian Maclaren wrote, "Let us be kind to one another, for most of us are fighting a hard battle." We are fully aware of our own struggle, but are often blind to the battle that others have to fight.

II. Stepping-stones To Self-improvement.

It is difficult for the average man or woman to look objectively at himself or herself. As an understanding psychiatrist said, "It is much more pleasant to feel a righteous indignation at others than to face a problem of one's own."

1. Frankly admit your weaknesses.

Saint Beuve, the French author and critic, observed that "One can get to the very depths of human life without going outside of oneself." Mark Twain wrote that every year he lived he was more convinced that he and other men were alike. Whatever virtues he had were shared by others, and their vices in some measure were found in him. Paul glanced at those who boasted that they had kept the law and those who admitted that they had broken it, and then wrote, "There is no difference, for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God."

2. Remember that there is much in you that is difficult for others to endure.

In The Imitation of Christ Thomas a Kempis wrote, "If thou canst not make thyself such as thou wouldst, how canst thou have another at thy pleasure? Gladly we desire to make other men perfect, but we will not amend our own fault." The moment you begin to feel indignant about the conduct of somebody else, stop and ask yourself this question: "What are the things in me that are a trial to other people?" If you will have the courage to look honestly at yourself, you will be much more lenient of your judgment of others.

3. Try to see life's problems from the other person's viewpoint.

Ezekiel had become exasperated with his fellow exiles in Babylon and contemptuous of them. He pronounced cynical judgments on them. Then for a whole week he lived among them, shared their difficulties, and tried to see their viewpoint. Forthwith his attitude and outlook were changed. He said, "I sat where they sat." He saw what they saw. He began to feel as they felt. Many conflicts would be resolved if people tried to see the viewpoint of others.

4. Remember that the highest wisdom is "Know thyself and God."

Can you really know yourself? When you make the attempt to know yourself you attempt a difficult task. You have an infinite capacity for self-deception. You explain away your failures and shortcomings. You excuse yourself, and try to place the blame on somebody else. According to Alphonse Karr, every person has three characters, that which he exhibits, that which he has, and that which he thinks he has. Only God knows the real man that he is. The Psalmist said, "Who can understand his errors? cleanse thou me from secret faults" (19:12). It is so much easier to see the faults of others than it is to see our own. Christ said that we can see the tiny mote or splinter in another person's eye, and at the same time be unaware of a beam or plank in our own. The Master then suggested, "Wouldn't it be wiser, first of all, to remove the beam from your own eye, and then it would be much easier to do something

about the little sliver in your friend's eye?" Join the Psalmist in the prayer: "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting" (139:23-24).

5. Draw upon the divine resources daily through Bible study and prayer.

Wait upon God and renew your strength. Isaiah said: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" (40:31). Begin the day by reading the Bible, seeking to find what God's "marching orders" are for the day. If you will draw upon the spiritual resources of the Bible, you will never lack light for your pathway or strength for the journey. Nothing is so conducive to emotional stability and healthy-mindedness as beginning the day with a brief passage of Scripture and with prayer. It sets the tone for the day, widens life's horizons, and prevents material interests and things from closing in upon us. The reason that some can take the hard knocks of life better than others is because they have more and better resources with which to meet them. Give the Lord His rightful place in your life and He will give you the strength with which to face courageously and victoriously whatever comes.