

"A RANSOM FOR MANY"

"And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." Matthew 20:27-28.

What is true greatness? Scarcely two people would give the same answer to this question. All would admit that it denotes pre-eminence, but each would have his own preference as to the realm in which it is to be manifested. Some would associate it with courage, some with power, others with eloquence, and still others with wealth; yet each would think of it as conferring an advantage upon its possessor, and thus putting others at a corresponding disadvantage. Still the prevalent idea of greatness is far from that which the words of our Lord define and describe. Christ regards him great who uses his talents and possessions in the service of mankind. This greatness is satisfying to its possessor. There is satisfaction always in serving our generation. He who, by the grace of God, seeks to make the world better by his presence will from that effort derive great joy. He will have within him the testimony of a good conscience, and above him the approval and blessing of Almighty God.

Christ did not come to be ministered unto, but to serve others. He saw too many souls about Him to be aided, too many doubts to be answered, too much spiritual darkness to be illumined, and too many sorrows to be comforted, to wait for others to minister unto Him. Seeing the needs, He set Himself to the task of supplying them. He was continually ministering to others. His death was the climax of a life of serving.

The Son of man came to minister. Strange the errand, and unique as the blessed Person Who undertook it. He stooped from the highest throne in glory down to the manger in Bethlehem, and on His part it was voluntary. It was His own strong desire to minister that made Him take upon Himself the nature of man. He voluntarily came on an errand of mercy to the sons of men. He Who was the King of kings and Lord of lords and Prince of peace voluntarily and cheerfully descended that He might dwell among the children of men, minister to them, share their sorrows and bear their sins. He came "not to be served, but to serve." There was not a semblance of selfishness in Him. He did not come looking for treasures, but to bestow unsearchable riches. He did not come to find specimens of good health, but cases of sickness upon which the healing art of His grace might operate.

A few years ago a fifteen-year-old boy, Guy Rockefeller, was trapped all night on a ledge five hundred feet down the side of a mountain in Arizona. The following day John Anderson, deputy sheriff of Pima County, rescued the boy. In climbing back up the rope toward safety, Anderson lost his grip and fell a thousand feet below to his death.

One wonders what the thoughts of that boy must have been. Surely he must have thought how much he owed to the man who, in rescuing him, lost his own life.

Each of us owes an incalculable debt to others. We owe so much to our parents. Our native endowments and potentialities comprise a decisive heritage which we owe to our parents, grandparents and the generations before us. Not only do we owe a debt for our physical heritage, but also for the influences that surround our birth and growth to maturity -- the interest and affection of our parents, the foresight and insight that went into their planning for our lives, the constant vigil of love that stood sentinel over us with an unspeakable debt.

This debt does not end with our family. It extends to the community and to society at large. This cultural heritage makes us creatures of civilization. Most of you have had little or nothing to do with the building our city. Few young people have contributed a dollar to the building of your church building, to the public schools you attend, to the heritage of government and all that makes up our culture.

In Washington, D. C., stands a stature in front of a large public building in memory of the man who said, "I regret that I have but one life to give to my country." During the Revolutionary War a commanding officer of the Colonial army desperately needed some information. He asked for volunteers for the dangerous mission of obtaining it. A young officer from Connecticut stepped forward and volunteered. He went through the enemy lines, acquired the information, and was heading back for his own line when he was captured. As spies usually are during war, he was sentenced to be executed. On the day of his execution he stood before the officer in charge. Said the officer, "Is there anything you would like to say?" To this question the nineteen-year-old officer replied, "I regret that I have but one life to give to my country."

That statue of Nathan Hale was not placed there just because of the bravery of one man. It was placed there because it stands for all the young men in the Revolutionary War who suffered and died that those coming after them could live in a land of freedom.

Following the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, his body lay in state in Washington. In the long line of people marching by to pay their respects to the President was a Negro woman with her young grandchild. After much waiting they stood before the casket. Reaching down, the old lady picked up her little grandson and, holding him up to view the face of the President, said, "Take a long look, sonny. He died for you." She was simply reminding him that he owed a debt.

The city of Marseilles was once visited by a plague. The ravages of it were fearful. Parents deserted their children, and children forgot their parents, to take care of themselves. The city was deserted by the masses. Nobody could stop the ravages of the plague. The doctors held consultations, but they could not find a remedy. They agreed that it was necessary for one of them to open the body of someone who had died in order to find out the nature of the plague. But who would do this, for it was certain that the one who did it would himself die soon thereafter? There was a pause. Suddenly one of the most famous physicians, a man in the prime of life, rose and said, "Be it so; I devote myself to the safety of my country. I swear, in the name of humanity and religion, that tomorrow at the break of day, I will dissect a corpse, and write down as I proceed what I observe." He went home, made his will (for he was a rich man), and spent that evening in religious exercises. During the night a man died from the plague. Guyon, the physician, entered the room next morning, and made the examination. As he went on he wrote down all that he saw, then left the room and put the paper in vinegar, so that it would not convey the plague to others. He then went to a convenient place, where he died within twelve hours.

Christ came to give His life as a ransom. The word "came" refers to the act of His entrance into the earthly life. "To give his life" refers to the act of His departure from this earthly life. They bring into prominence Christ's consent and action in the two things about which men are consulted least, namely, their being born and their dying. Christ died for us as a ransom, or in order that we might be set free. He had not sinned, but He gave His life for us. His death was voluntary. But for His death our deliverance would have been impossible. Through His sacrifice our salvation has been secured. Therefore, we owe everything to Him.

Because we owe such an incalculable debt, we have a responsibility. I do not know what Guy Rockefeller will do with his life, which was rescued by John Anderson. One thing is true, in all probability he will never be able to get away from the sense of obligation and responsibility which his rescue imposes upon him.

In an argument with her mother a girl said defiantly, "My life is my own. I can do with it what I please!" But, it is only a half-truth to say that you can do as you please with your life. You can waste your life or throw it away, of course. But in a deeper sense your life is not your own, and you cannot spend it as you please. To live carelessly or indifferently as though you were the only one who mattered is to violate a sacred trust.

Dr. W. H. P. Faunce, for many years president of Brown University, told of a student who had been somewhat wild and reckless. One day he sat at a table in a biological laboratory looking through a microscope at a tiny globule of protoplasm. Suddenly he stood up. "I see it now," he exclaimed. "I am a single link between the generations before me and those who may come after. I will not be a rotten link in that chain!" Thus our responsibility sometimes is borne in upon us. We discover that we not only owe a debt, but that we are trustees. We are important because society has invested in us, and because God has redeemed us. We are important not only for what we are, but for what we can become and what we can mean to others.

Each one of us must discharge his responsibility himself. It was not enough that the parents of young Rockefeller make some generous and appropriate gift to the widow of John Anderson. Guy has a responsibility which he himself must discharge.

Christ gave His life's blood as a ransom for us. He has reconciled us to God and delivered us from the power of Satan.

"I gave My life for thee,
My precious blood I shed,
That thou might'st ransomed be,
And quickened from the dead;
I gave, I gave My life for thee,
What hast thou given for Me?

And I have brought to thee,
Down from My home above,
Salvation full and free,
My pardon and My love;
I bring, I bring rich gifts to thee,
What hast thou brought to Me?"