

THE GREATEST GENIUS

"The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness. He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty; and he that ruleth his spirit than he that taketh a city." Proverbs 16:31-32.

Life is good. Sane people prize it. Life is a time for service. The more time allotted to one the greater is his opportunity for doing good. Time may be abused and misspent in sin. In our imagination we can see many crowns upon the heads of people. Many crowns are eagerly desired and diligently sought; such as beauty, rank, wealth, power and fame. That which people spend in trying to win these crowns is often far more valuable than this for which the sacrifices are made; and the crown, when it is worn, usually weighs heavier and gives less satisfaction than was imagined in the ardor of pursuit. Old age is a crown. Men desire it because it means a prolongation of life and the completion of the course of life. Life is greatly desired, so that is why people cling to it so tenaciously.

The Bible has shed a new glory over old age. Solomon testified, "The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness" (Proverbs 16:31). A hoary head is a crown of glory only if it is found in the way of righteousness. A hoary head in the way of ungodliness is one of the saddest spectacles upon which a person can look. A white head, accompanied with a holy heart, makes a person truly honorable.

The New Testament opens with a testimony about a hoary head being honorable. It gives a delightful picture of Anna, a prophetess, who at eighty-four years of age was found in the temple worshipping God and helping to keep alive the hope of Israel concerning the coming of the Messiah. There was the aged Simeon, too, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and having it revealed to him that he should not see death until he had seen the Christ. These were examples of hoary heads found in the way of righteousness and living in the favor of God. A man who has lived a long and useful Christian life is like a ship coming into harbor with precious cargo. Men and women who gave themselves to the Lord in their youth and have spent their lives in witnessing daily for Him should be regarded with affectionate respect. The older Christians have actually done what we can only hope and pray for strength to do. We should honor them, love them, imitate their faithfulness and follow their example.

Throughout the world people venerate a genius. We ordinary folk, aware of our mental limitations, look up in awe to the superior minds that conceived the masterpieces of art, science, philosophy and invention. We marvel at a genius. We build imposing monuments in memory of the man of genius, and stand before the work of genius as if it were a miracle.

The word genius is usually applied to that superior intellectual power which forms new and striking combinations and makes a practically new thing. We call it creative. "Myriad-minded" Shakespeare was able to assemble all the aspects and elements of human life -- its thoughts, feelings and motives -- and clothe them in language of such surprising beauty and vigor, and to picture them in such dramatic forms, as to amaze people. We read and wonder, and stand in awe before the mind that dreamed and wrote his remarkable plays. While in England I stood beside Shakespeare's huge statue in Stratford-upon-Avon in admiration and appreciation, as I wondered how one mind could contain and produce so many and such remarkable writings as he did. Truly he was a genius as an author. We listen with suspended breath and thrills of ecstasy to the Moonlight Sonata, and we feel the stupendous musical genius of Beethoven, who could hear in his soul these beautiful melodies and could assemble this combination of sounds.

I stood in Cologne, Germany, and looked in amazement at the great Cathedral, with its forest of lovely pinnacles and spires, its beauteous arches, its exquisite detail of niche and statue, and its noble harmony of proportion. One is simply amazed and stunned by its beauty and sublimity. But greater than the building is the mind that conceived its grand general outlines and its maze of intricate detail.

In spite of his egotism, heartlessness, and moral depravity, one admires the military genius of Napoleon, who could think in such large terms and act with such amazing energy; who could organize thousands of men of different opinions, motives and temperaments into an army which battered down cities, thrones, and empires. As I stood one day in the Les Invalides in Paris, France, which contains the tomb of this famous warrior, I looked up at the dome which towers three hundred and fifty feet high, and then looked down at that beautiful sarcophagus of red granite, which is thirteen feet long, six and one-half feet wide and fourteen feet high, in which the body of Napoleon had been placed, I thought what a pity that so much of his remarkable abilities and energies of this military genius had been spent in destruction instead of constructive activities.

According to the Bible, there is an order of genius that stands out above all of these, and that is the spiritual genius. From first to last the Bible maintains that godlike character is the richest of all possessions, the greatest of all achievements. It teaches that a Christian soul is a greater work of genius than literature, oratorios, cathedrals, or conquering armies.

It is great and admirable to take words and combine them in such a way as to express beautiful and helpful thoughts in an immortal piece of literature. It is great and admirable to take simple sounds and build them into a symphony; or rough stone and shapeless wood and combine them into a lovely building; but greater in the sight of God and true-seeing men is the spiritual genius that takes all the diverse and conflicting elements of human nature and organizes them into a harmonious and beautiful Christian life. While it is a worthy accomplishment to carve a stone into a form of beauty, it is more worthy to shape our thoughts into forms of purity, love and helpfulness.

It is greater and more noble feat to be able to rule one's own spirit than to capture a city. The spirit within a man is of more worth than any external conquests. A single spirit is of more value than the material world. The spirit of man is the object of God's love. Besides, it is immortal.

The heart is the field of battle. All of its evil passions are deadly foes. They must be met in conflict and triumphed over in the strength of God. The enemy is within. The enemy has acquired great power. The enemy is subtle. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jeremiah 17:9). Victory over self is the hardest of all victories to achieve. The taking of a city is easy compared with this "wrestling with flesh and blood." The former is only the battle of a day, or a few days at most. The latter is the weary, unceasing conflict of a life. There, the enemy might be mastered with a single blow. Here, he has to be conquered and kept under control with unremitting perseverance.

Self-mastery is greater in results than taking a city. On the surface, this statement may appear to be absurd. The man who rules his own spirit does something inward and private. The man who takes a city makes his mark on history. How can self-control be the more fruitful? First, it means more to the individual. The successful general, who takes a city, has won renown. Yet at best his glory is but superficial and empty. He may be despising himself while others are shouting his praises. But the strong

soul that has learned to control itself has the inward satisfaction of its self-mastery. Second, it means more to the world. Weak men may win success temporarily, but in the long run their feebleness is certain to expose itself. Greater is the man who conquers himself, who rules his own spirit, and brings his whole being under the supremacy of will than he who takes a city -- greater in his character and greater in his deeds.

Why is a person who conquers himself greater and better than a general who takes a city? He is a greater hero because he has performed a nobler deed. It is a braver, happier and nobler thing to conquer yourself than it is to take a city. This noble achievement is always pleasing to God. The reason why it pleases God for you to conquer your sins is because in so doing you will be growing more like Christ.

It is no small task and it requires considerable personal power for a person, surrounded as he is today by every inducement to evil, to keep from indulging in sinful living. The young man who keeps himself clean when so many others are going wrong is a real hero, a real genius. The young woman who, in the craze for popularity, society, and excitement, keeps her womanly modesty and overcomes temptation has genius. The business man, dealing daily with the sordid, who keeps his spirituality and integrity, ranks with the heroes.

On a monument erected to the memory of "Mother Bickerdyke," a faithful army nurse of the Civil War, who comforted and helped preserve the life of many a wounded soldier on the battlefield, are the words of General Sherman: "She outranks me."

In the highest form of genius some intellectual geniuses have been conspicuous failures. Lord Byron was master of his rhyme and meter, but not of his spirit and passions, and led an ungoverned moral life. Robert Burns, greatest of all homely poets, had the genius to write "The Cotter's Saturday Night," and songs that have sung themselves into the heart of the English-speaking world; but he, too, was a drunkard and a libertine. These men had the genius to conceive and organize a poem, but not the higher genius to organize the elements of their own being into a beautiful life of self-control. Alexander the Great was the supreme military genius of the ancient world, took many cities and conquered various nations, and had the making of a great statesman; but at the age of thirty-one he was dead from insane excesses. He could win battles, but could not fight sin and conquer his own spirit. He sighed for more world to conquer, but never tried to conquer the near world of his own spirit and life.

While many can never be intellectual geniuses, it is possible for all children of God to be spiritual geniuses, if they want to be. It is given to only a few to be renowned authors, inventors or statesmen, but it is possible for all Christians to be good people and live well-regulated lives, as they follow the example of their Saviour. If we cannot be masters of men, we can master ourselves. If we cannot wield a scepter over an empire, we can govern the kingdom of our own lives. If we cannot paint pictures, we can adorn the galleries of our own minds with lovely thoughts. If we cannot build a cathedral, we can construct a Christian character out of the common materials of everyday life. If we cannot command an army and batter down battalions, we can take command of ourselves and batter down the enemies that war against our individual souls. It is better to be a great Christian than any other kind of a genius.

Whoever would have strength, wisdom, and courage to rule his own life must be rightly related to Christ, Who alone can provide the necessary

inspiration and help. He must know Christ as his Saviour and be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit Who is promised as the helpful genius of every soul that will receive Him.