

SLIGHTLY SOILED, GREATLY REDUCED IN PRICE

"Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully." Psalm 24:3-4

On the bargain counter of the department store we sometimes find merchandise of the finest quality marked down to incredibly low prices. We pause and wonder why. Such quality, such beauty of design, such workmanship -- and so cheap! But closer examination reveals the reason, or perhaps a modest cardboard sign tells the story: "Slightly soiled, greatly reduced in price."

In the market of life we find much human material marked down. Many of these people are gifted, cultured, and of high potential, but slightly soiled -- in speech, in character, and in reputation -- and drastically reduced in value. They are not ruined, but they are disqualified for the highest achievements; they are defeated in their noblest aspirations. The best to which they can ever attain is only second best to that which might have been, had they kept their hearts pure and their hands clean.

In the loss accounts of a department store there are items of merchandise which have been completely ruined or hopelessly damaged in handling; but far greater in the aggregate are the losses on merchandise which has become slightly soiled, and so greatly reduced in price as to turn a potential profit into an actual loss.

In the loss accounts of the kingdom of God there are many reflections of the same principle. The great losses of a church do not come through the falling of its members into some flagrant, foul, and shocking iniquity, but through the subtle intrusion of the sin that slightly soils. We have seen people who at first impression thrill the soul. Spontaneously, you exclaim, they are the finest ever! But on closer acquaintance you discover that they are slightly soiled by the ways of the world, just enough to dim their Christian radiance, to muffle their Christian testimony, and to impair their Christian influence. Singly and collectively they are a loss to the kingdom of God.

I. The Danger Of Becoming Slightly Soiled Is Very Real.

It is not the sin that completely destroys that we must learn to fear the most, but the sin that soils slightly. It is not sin in the ugliness of its more gross forms, but sin in the attractiveness of its milder forms; not sin identified and labeled as to its true character, but sin in the guise of sweet innocence, like sugar-coated poison with its deadliness concealed.

It is not Satan like "a roaring lion" with his hideousness revealed, but Satan in the guise of a good fellow who is going to show us how to have a good time.

The sin that soils slightly does not leave the life of any Christian unmolested. There is no person so noble, so pure, or so completely dedicated as to be beyond its reach. There is no profession or calling so sacred or so sheltered as to be secure against its intrusion.

There is no environment so wholesome as to be secure against the stealthy infiltration of the sin that slightly soils. Every environment has its own peculiar temptations. There is no place so remote as to be beyond the reach of the baited hook. Soul, be on thy guard.

The sin that slightly soils often finds us unprepared for successful resistance. Perhaps it is because our spiritual vitality is low. To live a pure, godly life in an impure, ungodly world is no small undertaking. The testing to which a Christian life is subjected is like walking down a long corridor in an atmosphere saturated with multiplied

thousands of invisible disease germs. If the lungs are sound, and the heart is strong, and the blood stream is healthy, the germs may be thrown off without serious consequences. But if the lungs are unsound, the heart is weak, and the blood stream is without vitality, the outcome is likely to be disastrous. And how does one develop a strong spiritual stamina? The formula is much the same as for developing a strong body: plenty of good nourishment — the Word of God; plenty of wholesome exercise — Christian service; and plenty of pure air — the atmosphere of prayer.

Perhaps it is through want of spiritual discernment that we go down in defeat. Some are inclined to count as wrong only that which is inherently wicked, vicious, or degrading. Some consider only those things to be wrong which others do. Some can distinguish between white and black. But not between white and the varying shades of gray. This is particularly true in regard to the borderline pleasures in which they want to indulge. When character becomes slightly soiled, one's usefulness is discounted greatly.

II. The Value Of Those Who Have Become Slightly Soiled Is Greatly Reduced.

Slight soiling frequently leaves an indelible stain. One may lose what one can never fully recover. A damaged reputation is hard to repair. Slight soiling may involve outright defeat. Trifles often fix the course of human destiny, and trifles may make or break an individual who is living with a high purpose. The first church in which I served as pastor had licensed and ordained a young man for the work of the gospel ministry. He had finished his academic training and appeared before the Latonia Church in view of a call as pastor. The church was favorably impressed with him and the pulpit committee assured him that he would be recommended at the next business meeting. On Monday morning a member of the committee passed the window of the waiting room at the railroad station and saw him sitting therein reading and smoking a cigar. He did not receive the call because the members, who did not want their growing boys to become addicted to smoking, were unwilling to call a pastor who would set the wrong example. "Let us lay aside every weight," as well as "the sin which doth so easily beset us." No one is so gifted, so strong, and so capable that he can afford to encumber his Christian life with so much as one unnecessary weight.

One of our national heroes, who thrilled our nation as it has rarely been thrilled, was the young aviator Charles A. Lindbergh. Suppose that he had been less than his best when he undertook that memorable flight across the Atlantic Ocean by which he became world famous! In the terrific strain of those thirty-three and one-half hours alone day and night maneuvering that frail airplane through space, suppose his mind had been dulled, or his heart weakened, or his physical endurance depleted by dissipation! An ordinary Lindbergh, with ordinary powers and an ordinary airplane, could never have borne the strain, but would have come to an untimely end in the depths of the ocean. Extraordinary achievement is only for the extraordinary person, with extraordinary powers, grounded in extraordinary purity.

Suppose the Virgin Mary had been just slightly soiled! When God was selecting the young woman who was most pure, and most worthy to become the mother of the Son of God, would He have chosen her? Not at all! There were lesser things to which she might have attained, but the supreme honor would never have been hers.

III. The Safeguards Against Becoming Slightly Soiled Are Available.

1. Affirmative living.

Every vice is the opposite of some virtue. Cultivate the virtues, and the vices fall away, like dead leaves falling before the oncoming growth of new leaves. When you learn to say "yes" to Christ, it will not often be necessary to say "no" to the

world. A life filled with the right things is fairly secure against the intrusion of the wrong ones. Christ said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." This "abundant life" is a life filled to overflowing with the privileges, responsibilities, and compensations of godly living.

That which is required of us is not what is seen in the wooden Indian, standing out in front of a store the year around, and never does a wrong thing, and never does anything else. Our safety against that which soils is in positive, outgoing efforts which do not leave any thought, time, room, or energy for that which soils.

2. Worthy friendships.

To a remarkable degree we are molded by our friends. Great men and women are often produced in clusters. A common ideal binds them together. They grow together -- inspiring, strengthening, and building one another. Thus, at the heart of every church and every Christian institution, in its golden years, there is a small cluster of dedicated men and women standing together, and encouraging one another to good works. One person may start a movement, but he cannot carry it through without the enlistment of a group of kindred spirits. The fellowship of like-minded believers is one of the richest gifts of God and a mighty source of strength in times of testing. Many a Christian has been saved from falling into some bad sin by being in the right crowd of true and worthy friends. Each person chooses his own friends -- worthy or unworthy, as the case may be.

3. Absolute devotion to Christ.

In the hour of crisis, when our own strength gives way, and other helpers fail, one hope remains. "I need Thee every hour; stay Thou near by; temptations lose their power when Thou art nigh." Truer words were never put in rhyme or set to music. Not only in the hour of conscious temptation is He our refuge, but in those crucial hours of sickness, suffering, separation, and sorrow which have swept so many off their feet.

Before the hour of crisis, the decisive steps are taken and the outcome of the crisis is largely determined. In the quiet moments of contemplation the heart and the life are thrown open to the Saviorhood and Lordship of Christ, and to His everlasting partnership. "I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Thus reinforced, the soul is prepared for emergencies, and begins laying up spiritual reserves for the unknown future.

General Stonewall Jackson did not choose the name "Stonewall," by which he is known in history, but he earned it. He was a deeply spiritual man. He never went into battle without prayer. He never failed to thank God publicly for victory. In one of the great battles of the Civil War, when the battle line was wavering, General Lee rallied his South Carolinian troops with that memorable challenge, "Look at Jackson -- there he stands like a stone wall." His serenity in battle was almost unbelievable. How did he secure it? His attendant said that he could always tell when the General was "going on an expedition," by the added time which he spent in his secret place of prayer. Thus the battle may be won before it begins.

With point and purpose the word of the Psalmist comes to us as follows: "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place?" This verse sets before us the supreme prerogative of the child of God -- to ascend into the hill of the Lord, and to stand in the holy place; to have a true and unbroken fellowship with God. This fellowship with God, which is indispensable to our peace and joy, is impossible to those with unclean hands and impure hearts.

You may talk about your hands being shapely, strong, or skilful, but the important thing is, Are they clean hands? You cannot go through this sinful world without getting dirty hands. When your hands get dirty you wash them, and rightly so. Yet, there are Christians, who wash their hands regularly, who do not allow the washing of the Word of God to keep them clean in a dirty and sinful world. Their hands hang down in idleness and uselessness because they are not clean. God requires clean hands of those whom He uses in His service. A surgeon would not think of putting unclean hands in the vitals of his patient. Even so the believer who would attain to his highest and best must pay the price in terms of dedication and purity of life. God cannot make one of His children a channel of blessing if he has unclean hands and an impure heart.

Toward the close of his life David had an all-consuming ambition, namely, to build a magnificent temple unto his Lord. But David was denied that great privilege because his hands were unclean with the blood of his fellowman. Time had not erased that stain from his record.

Christ Jesus, the strongest of the strong, and the purest of the pure, remains our incomparable ideal. He could not have lifted men out of the depths of sin with unclean hands, nor inspired the world with an unclean tongue, nor ennobled the world with an unclean life. In loving reference to His disciples, He said, "For their sakes I sanctify myself." And the hands which He lovingly laid upon the blind, the lame, the leper, the deaf, and the speechless, tenderly restoring them, were clean hands. The hands which he gently laid upon the little children, and with which He broke the bread and fed the multitudes, were clean hands. The hands which He lifted up in prayer, calling down the power of heaven, were clean hands. And the hands which were nailed to the cross for the sins of men were clean hands.

"See, from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down:
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all."