

LIVING FOR OTHERS

"For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself." Romans 14:7.

There is nothing in the universe that stands alone. No atom of might, no drop of water, no particle of air, and no ray of light exists in a state of isolation. By nature man is a social being. We have been influenced by past generations, and we are influencing the present and the future generations. "No one of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself." All of us are formed for society, and are dependent upon each other for prosperity, mental improvement, comfort and happiness. Interdependence is an absolute fact.

Influence baffles definition. It is the atmosphere we carry about with us. It is something that belongs to us and to no one else. It distinguishes us from all others. I like to think of influence as a silent something that goes out from every life like heat from a fire, or fragrance from a flower, and it gives shape and color to other lives.

I. The Reality of Influence.

From the beginning to the present hour there has been a system of reciprocal pleasures and benefits, sorrows and evils working in the affairs of men. Every person is placed on the earth for some good and definite purpose, and impresses those around him for good or evil. There is a vast difference in the degrees of influence that men have, but each one exerts some influence upon those around him. There is an invisible something which radiates from every personality. It is invisible but real. No human being can come into this world without increasing or diminishing the sum total of human happiness. Our influence upon others is inevitable. Every man is a missionary for good or for evil, whether he intends to be or not. He is either a blot or a blessing, but he cannot be a blank. He is either a light to illuminate or a tempest to destroy.

1. Involuntary influence.

This is the type of influence of which we are unaware. Thus it is that one man, without intention or even a consciousness of the fact, is ever leading some other after him. The influences we exert involuntarily always agree with our real characters. If we are godly, they are good; if we are ungodly, they are bad. The door of involuntary influence is always open. Let us notice some miscellaneous proofs of involuntary influence.

(1) The instinct of imitation in children.

We begin our experiences, not with acts grounded in judgment or reason, or with ideas received through language, but by simple imitation, and, under the guidance of this, we lay our foundations. The child looks and listens, and whatever tone of feeling or manner of conduct is displayed around him, it sinks into his plastic, passive soul, and becomes the mold of his being ever after. His soul is a purely receptive nature, and that, for a considerable period, without choice of selection. A little later, he begins voluntarily to

copy what he sees and hears. Voice, manner, gait, everything which the eye sees, the mimic instinct delights to act over. The little girl sees her mother nurse the baby, and she must have a doll. The boy sees his father drive the car, and he must have a toy automobile. And thus we have a whole generation of future men and women receiving from us their beginnings, and the deepest impulses of their lives. They watch us, and when we are meaning them no good or evil, when we are unconscious of exerting any influence upon them, they are drawing from us impressions and molds of habit, which, if wrong, no heavenly discipline can wholly remove; or, if right, no bad associations utterly dissipate.

(2) The respect of others.

We naturally desire the approbation or good opinion of others. You see the strength of this feeling in the article of fashion. How few people have the nerve to resist a fashion! How many will violate the best rules of society because it is the practice of their circle! How many reject Christ because of friends or acquaintances, who have no suspicion of the influence they exert, and will never have, until the last day shows them what they have done!

You cannot reasonably doubt that others are continually receiving impressions from your character and life.

2. Voluntary Influence.

This is the type of influence which we exert purposely or in the endeavor to sway another, as by speaking, teaching, persuasion, threatenings, offers, and promises. It is that which we say and do for a special purpose. Speech, or voluntary influence, is a door to the soul that we may open or shut at will.

It is very evident, then, that we cannot live without exerting an influence. Simply to live in this world is to exert an influence. You cannot live or die without exerting an influence. All lives exert influence—some in small measure, some in large measure, to be sure, but influence nevertheless. You make the world better or worse. You have a part in peopling heaven or in filling hell.

One of the most far-reaching things in the world is personal influence. We exert it whether we wish to do so or not. Robert Burns, the Scotch poet, who was idolized in his time and whose songs are still sung around the world, once placed his hand on the head of a twelve-year-old boy named Walter Scott and said, "My dear boy, you will some day be a great man; yes, a greater man than your father or grandfather." For the young lad, that was a mountain-top experience. Years afterward, when he had become a famous writer, the author of the Waverley novels declared, "My meeting Robert Burns was the greatest event in my life. I felt an ordination into literature the moment he put his hand on my head, and whatever I have achieved, I owe it in a large measure to the inspiration I got from him." That personal contact with Burns touched Scott into flame. One never knows the magic of the spoken word.

Influence is a remarkable thing, eternal as the heavens. Every influence of man, whether for evil or for good, lives after him and plays its part in shaping the character of future ages. Not only is influence eternal, but it grows. At first, it may be a little thing, but it increases in volume and momentum until it becomes a great power.

Near the source of the Mississippi River, the stream is so small that a leaf falling from a tree will change the course of the stream; while at New Orleans the river is so wide and so deep that it took thirteen million dollars to span the stream with a bridge. This is an example of life. When a habit is beginning to form in the life of a youth, a kind word from a friend can change the course of that life; but, if the habit is allowed to mature it gets the upper hand of the individual and there doesn't seem to be anything that can stop it. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful of our influence.

II. The Responsibility For Influence.

We are responsible to God for our influence. We must render an account to Him for all our thoughts, our feelings, words, and deeds are the manufacturers of influence, and if we are responsible for the one, we are most assuredly responsible for the other. We are not only accountable to God for an evil influence, but also for exerting an influence for good.

1. Your influence is permanent in its character.

It is beyond man's power to recall his influence. When once a look or word or deed escapes one, it is beyond the power of the individual to call it back. When influence is once exerted, it cannot be destroyed or undone. Every act performed is written on the character of the world around us, for good or for evil. "None of us liveth to himself," should be constantly before our minds as a restraining memory to keep us from evil, and an inspiring memory to cheer us on to make the world better than we found it.

As a pebble thrown into the water causes bubbles to rise and rings of waves to wash the shores of the lake, so a good deed causes bubbles of cheer to rise and rings of joy to surround the globe. Every day we are exerting an influence which must live long after we are gone, and whether for good or evil, it survives the stroke of death, outlives the pulverizing process of the grave, and will be found working when time hushes and eternity dawns. Oh, what a sublime and awful thing live! Knowing that our influence will never die, let us be careful how we live. A dying man, whose life had been poorly spent, remarked, "My influence, oh that my influence could be gathered up and buried with me." But, it could not be done. It was too late; he had put in motion an agency which he was entirely powerless to arrest. Let us be careful what influence we leave behind us.

2. You influence involves others.

You cannot touch another life without leaving your mark upon it, although it may never occur to you that you are doing anything of the kind. You cannot live a godly life without somebody being helped and the world being made better by it.

III. The Results of Influence.

1. Evil results.

The wise man said, "One sinner destroyeth much good." Everyday experience will supply many illustrations of this truth. One bad person will be the center of corruption to the whole circle in which they move. How terrible is the guilt of those who have become the corrupters of others! How terrible is the power of evil to propagate itself! No man can do wrong and others not suffer. No man's actions stop with himself.

A man once walked with a farmer through a beautiful field, when the farmer saw a tall thistle on the other side of the fence. He climbed over the fence, and cut the thistle off at the top of the ground. "Is that your field?" asked his companion. "Oh, no!" said the farmer, "Bad weeds do not care much for fences, and if I should leave that thistle to bloom in my neighbors field, I should soon have plenty in my own." Bad men are like thistles. They pay no attention to fences. They are a menace to the peace and prosperity of all classes. And the only way for the Christian people in a community to secure their own peace and happiness is to win them to Christ or to shut them up in prison.

There is a tree which grows on the hill slopes of Chile which the natives look upon as being possessed of an evil spirit. On various occasions innocent travelers have crept under the shade of one of these trees during the heat of the day, and paid for its shade with their lives. After resting under one of these trees for a short time the hands and face of a traveller become swollen, as in a case of snake-bite, and the surface of the skin is covered with boils. Many visitors in the vicinity of Valparaiso have succumbed to the influence of this poisonous tree. There are some men and women like that tree. Whoever rests in their shadow is poisoned by the baneful influence of their evil characters.

2. Good results.

What an influence for good Christian parents may exercise upon their children, with far-reaching results to the world!

Many years ago a young fellow by the name of Wray, a student at Princeton, applied for appointment as a foreign missionary. He was a thoroughly good man, but not very quick in respect to learning, and when he reached the field of his prospective labors he found it difficult to master the language. But though the simple natives could not understand his talk, they could understand his walk. One day when they were seated in a circle on the ground, listening to the instruction of one of their teachers, the question was asked, "What is it to be a Christian?" And none could answer. Finally one pointed to the place where this young man sat and said, "It is to live as Mr. Wray lives." Not one of them could read the gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke or John, but all could read the gospel according to Wray.

There is one argument which no unbeliever has ever answered -- a godly life. There is nothing so powerful for good as a godly life. The influence of a godly life is mighty for good and is as lasting as eternity. The thing for us to do is to be real Christians, live near to God, cultivate a Christ-like character, and then our lives are sure to be a great blessing to others and of great use to the Lord. Bear in mind always that you are living not for yourselves, but for God and for those who are around you.

If our lives have not been as we would have them, let us not give up to remorse. Life's day is too brief. Let us live in the present, and each, by the grace of God, be better in the future. God help us so to live that our influence may be for the honor and glory of His name, and for the welfare of our fellowmen.