

The Beauty of Self-Control - Part 1

by J.R. Miller

The sermon emphasizes the importance and beauty of self-control as a vital aspect of Christian character and personal mastery.

Scripture: Galatians 5:22

Topics: "Self-Control", "Character Development"

Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the beauty and necessity of self-control in a Christian's life, illustrating how it is essential for achieving a noble character and maintaining inner peace. He explains that self-control is not merely about restraint but is a form of kingship over one's life, allowing individuals to respond to challenges with grace rather than anger. Miller uses biblical examples, including Jesus and King Saul, to demonstrate how true strength lies in the ability to remain calm and loving under provocation. He encourages believers to seek divine help in cultivating self-control, as it is a gradual process that leads to a more beautiful and fulfilling life. Ultimately, Miller asserts that self-control is a reflection of God's beauty and a vital aspect of living a life that honors Him.

Transcript

The Beauty of Self-control

Part 1

J. R. Miller

Chapter 1

The Beauty of Self-Control

All of life should be beautiful. God is a God of beauty. He never made anything that was not beautiful. Paul, in designating certain qualities of character which every Christian should strive to attain, names "whatever things are lovely." Nothing that is unlovely should be allowed in the life of any Christian. We should always strive to be beautiful in life. Marden names as signs of deterioration in character, "when you are satisfied with mediocrity, when commonness does not trouble you, when a slighted job does not haunt you."

Self-control is one of the finest things in any life. It is not a single element in character--but something that has to do with all the element. It binds them all together in one. In one of Paul's clusters of the qualities of a noble character, he names--love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, ending with self-control. Self-control is self-mastery. It is kingship over all life. At the center of your being, sits yourself. Your seat ought to be a throne. If you are not in control, if there are any forces in your nature which are unruly, which do not acknowledge your sway--you are not the king which you should be. Part of your kingdom is in insurrection. The strength of your life is divided. The strong man is he whose whole being is subject to him.

Perfect self-control is ideal life. You are like a man driving a team of spirited horses. So long as he sits on the driver's seat and the horses obey him implicitly, acknowledging the slightest pressure upon the reins--all is well. But if the animals become ungovernable, begin to chomp on the bits, and cease to obey the driver's impulse, and then dash away from his guidance--he has lost his control. A man has self-control when he sits in his place--and has his hands on all the reins of his life. His is kingly when he has complete master of his temper, his speech, his feelings, his appetites; when he can be quiet under injury and wrong; deeply hurt but showing no sign of malice; patient and still under severe provocation; when he can stand amid temptations and not yield to them.

A man when insulted may break out into a passion of anger, and become a very "son of thunder" in the vehemence of his rage. But that is not strength. The man who when treated unjustly remains silent, answers not a word, with cheeks white, yet restraining himself, showing no resentment--but keeping love in his heart--is the strong man. The Wise Man puts it thus: "He who is slow to anger--is better than the mighty; and he who rules his spirit--is better than he who takes a city."

There are men who rule other men--but cannot rule themselves. They are victorious in battle--but they cannot control their own temper, restrain their own speech, or calm and quiet their own hearts. There is nothing beautiful in such a life. Nothing more effectually mars a life--than fretfulness, discontent, worry, or impatience. Nothing is more pitiful--than a life which is made to be strong, kingly, noble, calm, and peaceful--but which is, instead, the slave of every excitement, every temper, every resentment, every appetite and passion. Someone says, "Alexander conquered all the world--except Alexander."

Not only is self-control strong -- it is also beautiful. Anger is not beautiful. Ungoverned temper is not lovely. Rage is demonic. But a spirit calm, strong, and unflustered, amid storms of feeling and all manner of disturbing emotions--is sublime in its beauty. "A temper under control, a heart subdued into tenderness and patience, a voice cheerful with hope, and a countenance bright with kindness--are invaluable possessions to any man or woman."

The Bible furnishes examples of self-control. One is in the story of King Saul's anointing. The people received him with great enthusiasm. "All the people shouted, and said, Long live the King." He then went to his house, and the army went with him. But there were a few who refused to accept him. "Certain worthless fellows said, how shall this man save us? And they despised him, and brought him no present." Saul might have resented the insult offered him, for he was king now, and might have slain those who refused to receive him; but he restrained himself and spoke not a word. Amid the sneers and scoffs of these worthless men, he was as though he heard nothing of all they said. He held his peace.

We are apt to resent insults, and retaliate when others do us evil. But the Christian way is either not to speak at all, or to give the soft answer which turns away wrath. The way to conquer an enemy--is to treat

him with kindness! Ignoring slights and quietly going on with love's duty, returning kindness for unkindness, is the way to get the true victory. The best answer to sneers, scoffs, and abuse--is a life of persistent patience and gentleness.

It is in Jesus that we have the finest illustrations of self-control, as of all noble qualities. The tongue is the hardest of all the members of the body to control. No man can tame it, says James. Yet Jesus had perfect mastery over his tongue. He never said a word that he would better not have said. He never spoke unadvisedly. When bitterly assailed by enemies, when they sought to catch him in his words, when they tried by false accusations to make him speak angrily--he held his peace and said not a word. Not only did he refrain from hasty and ill tempered speech--but he kept his heart in control. Some men can keep silence with their lips though in their hearts the fire burns hotly; but Jesus kept love in his heart under all provocation. He was master of his thoughts and feelings. He never grew angry or bitter. When he was reviled--he did not revile in return; when he was hated--he loved on; when nails were driven through his hands--the blood from his wounds became the blood of redemption!

Nor was it weakness in Jesus, which kept him silent under men's reproaches and reviling, and under all injuries and insults. There was no moment when he could not have summoned legions of angels to defend him and to strike down his persecutors. He voluntarily accepted wrong--when he could have resisted. He never lifted a finger on his own behalf, though he could have crushed his enemies. He returned kindness for unkindness. Thus he set us the example of patient endurance of wrong, of silent suffering, rather than angry retaliation.

In his words, also, Christ teaches us this lesson of self-control. Meekness is one of the Beatitudes. It is the ripe fruit of restraint, under insult and wrong. "Accustom yourself to injustice" was the counsel of an English preacher. It is not easy to accept such teaching. We do not like to be treated unjustly. We can learn to endure a good many other things--and still keep patient and sweet. But to endure injustice seems to be beyond the "seventy times seven" included in our Lord's measurement of forgiving. Yet it is not beyond the limit of the law of love. Certainly the Master in his own life accustomed himself to injustice. He was silent even under the worst injustices, and he leaves the lesson of his example to us.

The beauty of self-control! It is always beautiful, and the lack of it is always a blemish. A lovely face which has won us by its beauty, instantly loses its charm and winsomeness, when in some excitement, bad temper breaks out. An angry countenance is disfiguring. It hides the angel and reveals the demon. Self-control gives calmness and poise. It should be practiced not only on great occasions--but on the smallest. A hundred times a day it will save us from weakness and fluster--and make us strong a quiet. It is the outcome of peace. If the heart is still and quiet with the peace of Christ--the whole life is under heavenly guard. The king is on his throne--and there is no misrule anywhere.

How can we get this self-control which means so much to our lives? It is essential if we would live beautifully. We are weak without it. How can we get the mastery over ourselves? It is not attained by a mere resolve. We cannot simply assert our self-mastery, and then have it. We cannot put self-control on the throne, by a mere proclamation. It is an achievement which must be won by ourselves, and won by degrees. It is a lesson which must be learned, a long lesson which it takes many days to learn. As Lowell says:

"Beauty and truth and all that these contain,

Drop not like ripened fruit about our feet;

We climb to them through years of sweat and pain."

We need divine help in learning the lesson. Yet we must be diligent in doing our part. God helps those who help themselves. When we strive to be calm and self-controlled, he puts his own strength into our heart. Then we shall find ourselves growing strong and gaining in self-mastery. The attainment will come slowly.

But however long it may take us to reach this heavenly achievement, we should never be content until we have reached it. This is the sum of all learning and experience. It is the completeness of all spiritual culture. The man in us is only part a man--while we are not master of ourselves. We are in grave peril while any weak hour we may lose our kingliness and be cast down. It took Moses forty years to learn self-control--and he did not learn it in the world's universities; it was only when God was his teacher and his school was in the desert, that he mastered it. Then in a sad, unwatched moment he lost his kingly power for an instant and spoke a few words unadvisedly, and failed and could not finish his work!

Think what the lack of self-control is costing men continually! One moment's dropping of the reins--and a wrong decision is made--a temptation is accepted--a battle is lost--and a splendid life lies in ruin! Let us achieve the grace of self-control.

Chapter 2

The Work of the Plough

The figure of ploughing, much used in the Bible, is very suggestive. The initial work in making Christians--is plough work. Human hearts are hard, and the first tool which must go over them, must be a plough, that they may be broken up and softened. In our Lord's parable, some seeds fell on the trodden wayside. The soil was good--it was the same as that which, in another part of the field, yielded a hundredfold--but it was hard. It had been long a roadway across the field and thousands of feet had gone over it, treading it down. There was no use in sowing seed upon it, for the ground would not receive it, and lying upon the hardened surface, the birds in eager quest for food would pick it off. The only way to make anything of this trodden roadside, was to have it broken up by the plough.

The first work of Christ in many lives is ploughing. The lives have not been cultivated. They have been left untilled. Or, like the wayside ground, they have been trodden down into hardness. Many people treat their lives as if they were meant to be open commons, instead of beautiful gardens. They do not fence them in to protect them--and so beasts pasture on them, trampling over them; children play upon them; and men drive their carriages and their heavy wagons across them making roadways as hard as rock. We readily understand this in agriculture, and it is little more difficult to understand it in life culture.

A godly woman said that God wanted her heart to be a garden filled with sweet flowers. A garden needs constant care. Our lives should be watched continually, that the soil shall always be tender, so that all manner of lovely things may grow in them--but there are many lives that are not thus cared for and cultivated. They are unfenced, and all kinds of harsh feet go treading over them. No care is given to the companions who are allowed admittance into the field; soon the gentle things are destroyed, and the tender, mellow soil has become hard. Those who are entrusted with the care of children should never fail to think of their responsibility for the influences which are allowed to touch them.

For the lack of such care, many men and women become hardened, without capacity to receive tender impressions. They have large capacities for rich, beautiful life and for splendid service--but they are

permitted to read all kinds of books, and to have all kinds of amusements, and to see all kinds of entertainments, and to see all kinds of evil life--and they grow up without beauty, really useless and without loveliness. They need to be ploughed and ploughed deep, that they may be made fertile.

God himself does a great deal of ploughing. His Word is a plough. It cuts its way into men's lives, crushing the heart, revealing sinfulness, producing penitence. It finds men impenitent--and leaves them broken and contrite, confessing sin and asking for mercy. David tells us, in one of his penitential Psalms, how he tried for a long time to hide his sins--but how his pain became unbearable, until he confessed. God's plough went deep into his heart. Then when at length he confessed his sin, forgiveness came and peace and joy. David became a new man after that. God's Spirit had ploughed up his heart.

A Bible found its way into a home where a Bible had never been before. The man of the house began to read it aloud to his wife in the evenings, and the words entered their hearts. One night, after reading aloud portions of the book, the man said, "Wife, if this book is true--then we are wrong." The book condemned them. They became troubled. The word was ploughing its way in their hearts. Next evening, as they read again, the sense of sin in them became still deeper, and the man said, "Wife, if this book is true--then we are lost." They became very greatly distressed. The words they had read had shown them that they were sinners, guilty, and lost. Next night they read again, and found something of hope--they had read of divine love and mercy, and the man said, "Wife, if this book is true--then we can be saved." The word of God does mighty plough work in men's hearts before they can be made fruitful.

Sorrow oftentimes is God's plough. We dread pain and shrink from it. It seems destructive and ruinous. The plough tears its way, with its keen, sharp blade, through our hearts--and we say we are being destroyed! When the process is completed and we look upon the garden with its sweet flowers growing--we see that only blessing, enrichment, and beauty are the result. We complain of our suffering, but we cannot afford to have suffering taken away.

We cannot afford to lose pain out of the world--or out of our life. It means too much to us. We owe too much, get too many joys and treasures from it--to have it taken out of our lives. We owe to suffering many of the treasures of experience. Without pain we never could know Christ deeply, intimately, experimentally. Two friends may love each other very sincerely, without suffering together--but it is a new friendship into which they enter when they stand side by side in a great sorrow. Grief reveals Christ and draws him closer to us, and we love him better afterwards. To take pain from the world would be to rob life of its divinest joy, its richest blessings. If the plough never cut through the soil--there would be no furrows and no golden harvests.

This plough work is for every one of us. God is making us--and that is the way he has to do it. A little child had a garden, which her father had given her. But nothing would grow in it. The flowers and plants would begin to come up--but in a short time they would wither and die. She had little pleasure from her garden. One day her father brought some workmen with heavy iron tools, and they began to tear up her garden. They removed the soil. They destroyed everything beautiful in it. The child begged that the men would go away. She said they were ruining her garden. But they heeded not her imploring and tears. They broke up the ground and found a great rock just below the surface. This they took away, then smoothed down the soil, and made it beautiful again. After that the flowers and plants grew into beauty. Then the child understood the value of the plough work, which at first seemed so destructive--but in the end left her garden a place of rare beauty.

Christ has, in his love for us--a wonderful vision of what he wants us to become. He would have us share his own glory. "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us" is a prayer God loves to answer. He wants us to become radiant in loveliness. He wants love to blossom in our lives into all gentleness, sweetness, purity, and patience, into ideal manliness, heroic nobleness, splendid sacrificial life. But we never can attain this vision in ways of ease. To spare us from the pain, struggle and suffering--is not the way of truest kindness for us. It needs the plough and sharp plough-work, to bring us to our best beauty.

Ploughing is hard work. It is hard for him who follows the plough through the long furrows. There seems to be no reward for him. It is all painful work that he does--cutting and crushing the soil. He sees no growing seed, no golden harvest. It is all weariness, aches and toil for him, with nothing to cheer his heart, nothing to enrich him. The reaper rejoices as he thrusts in his sickle and then threshes out the yellow grain. But the work of the ploughman seems to be destruction for the time. Yet in the end it proves to be glorious work.

It is hard also for the soil, to have the plough of God driven through our hearts and over our lives, breaking them and crushing them. Oh, how heavy God's plough is, as it is dragged over us, its sharp plow-share cutting into the very center of our being. Rough is the plough work. It has no comfort in it. No reward is apparent. The plough cuts remorselessly. But the ploughman may have visions of a rich outcome from all his toil. There will be a harvest by and by, when, in the place where his share now cuts, golden grain will wave, and he will fill his bosom with sheaves. You cry out today because of the pain you suffer as God's plough cuts into your life and seems to be spoiling all its beauty. But look forward. First the plough--then the fields with their glorious grain. Now you know nothing but pain; hereafter you will reap joy from the places now scarred and furrowed.

There is a picture in Revelation which explains it all. There appeared a great company, wearing white robes and carrying palm branches. "Who are these?" was asked. "These are those who have come out of the great tribulation," was the answer. The way to heaven's highest glory--lies through pain. Today the plough is cutting through your life; tomorrow a blessed harvest will wave!

Chapter 3

Finding Our Duties

Some people have trouble in discovering God's guidance in everyday life. Perhaps the trouble is that they look for the direction in some unusual way, whereas, ordinarily, it is shown to them very simply.

Duty never is a haphazard thing. There never are a half dozen things any one of which we may fitly do at any particular time; there is some one definite thing in the divine thought for each moment. In writing music, no composer strews the notes along the staff just as they happen to fall on this line or that space; he sets them in harmonious order and succession, so that they will make sweet music when played or sung. The builder does not fling the beams or stones into the edifice without plan; every block of wood, or stone, or iron, and every brick have its place, and the building rises in graceful beauty.

The days are like the lines and spaces in the musical staff, and duties are the notes; each life is meant to make a harmony and in order to do this, each single duty must have its own proper place. One thing done out of its time and place makes discord in the music of life, just as one note misplaced on the musical staff makes discord. Each life is a building, and the little acts are the materials used; the whole is congruous and beautiful only when every act is in its own true place.

The art of true living therefore, consists largely in doing always those things which belongs to the moment. But to know what is the duty of each moment is the question which, to, many people is full of perplexity. Yet it would be easy if our obedience were but more simple. We have only to take the duty which comes next to our hand. Our duty never is some far away thing. We do not have to search for it--but it is always close at hand and easily found. The trouble is that we complicate the question of duty for ourselves by our way of looking at life, and then get our feet entangled in the meshes which our own hands have woven.

Much of this confusion arises from taking too long views. We try to settle our duty in long sections. We think of years rather than of moments, of a whole life work rather than of individual acts. It is hard to plan a year's duty; it is easy to plan just for one short day. No shoulder can bear up the burden of a year's cares, all gathered into one load--but the weakest shoulder can carry without weariness what really belongs to one little day. In trying to grasp the whole year's work, we are apt to overlook and to miss that of the present hour, just as one, in gazing at a far off mountain top, is likely not to see the little flower blooming at his feet, and even tread it down as he stumbles along.

There is another way in which people complicate the question of duty. They try to reach decisions today, on matters which really are not before them today, and which will not be before them for months--but possibly for years. For example, a young man came to his pastor in very sore perplexity over a question of duty. He said he could not decide whether he ought to go as a foreign missionary or devote his life to work in some home field. Yet the young man had only closed his freshman year at college. It would require him three years more to complete his college course, and then he would have to spend three years in a theological seminary. Six years hence he would be ready for his work as a minister, and it was concerning his choice of field then that the young man was now in such perplexity. He said that often he passed hours on his knees at prayer, seeking for light--but no light had come. He had even tried fasting--but without avail. The matter had so taken possession of his mind that he had scarcely been able to study during the last term, and he had fallen behind in his classes. His health, too, he felt, was being endangered, as he often lay awake much of the night, thinking about the momentous question of his duty, as between home and foreign work.

It is very easy to see what this young man's mistake was--he was trying to settle now a question with which he had nothing whatever to do at the present time. If he is spared to complete his course of training, the question will emerge as a really practical one, several years hence. It is folly now to compel a decision which he cannot make intelligently and without perplexity. It is very evident therefore that this decision is no part of his present duty. He wonders that he can get no light on the matter--but that even in answer to agonizing prayer, the perplexity does not grow less. But is there any ground to expect God to throw light on a man's path so far in advance? Is there any promise that prayer for guidance at a point so remote should be answered today? Why should it be? Will it not be time enough for the answer to come when the decision must really be made?

It is right, no doubt, for the young man to pray about the matter--but his present request should be that God would direct his preparation, so that he may be fitted for the work, whatever it may be, that in the divine purpose is waiting for him, and that, at the proper time, God would lead him to his allotted field. "Lord, prepare me for what you are preparing for me," was the daily prayer of one young life. This would have been a fitting prayer for this young student; but to pray that he may know where the Lord will send him to labor when he is ready, six years hence, is certainly an unwarranted asking which is little short of presumption and of impertinent human intermeddling with divine things.

Another obvious element of mistake in this man's case is that he is neglecting his present duty, or failing to do it well, while he is perplexing himself with what his duty will be years hence. Thus he is hindering the divine purpose in the work his Master has planned for him. Life is not an hour too long. It requires every moment of our time to work out the divine plan for our lives. The preparatory years are enough, if they are faithfully used, in which to prepare for the years of life work which come after. But every hour we waste, leaves its own flaw in the preparation. Many people go halting and stumbling all through their later years, missing opportunities, and continually failing where they ought to have succeeded, because they neglected their duty in the preparatory years. There are more people who, like this student, worry about matters that belong altogether to the future, than there are those who are anxious to do well the duty for the present moment. If we would simply do always the next thing, we would be relieved of all perplexity.

The law of divine guidance is, step by step. One who carries a lantern on a country road at night, sees only one step before him. If he takes that step, however, he carries his lantern forward and this makes another step plain. At length he reaches his destination without once stepping into the darkness. The whole way has been made light for him, though only a step at a time. This is the usual method of God's guidance. The Bible is represented as a lamp unto the feet. It is a lamp, or lantern--but not a blazing sun, nor even a lighthouse--but a plain, common lantern, which one can carry about in his hand. It is a lamp unto the feet, not throwing its beams afar, not illumining a whole hemisphere--but shining only on the bit of road on which the pilgrim's feet are walking.

If this is the way God guides us, it ought never to be hard for us to find our duty. It never lies far away, inaccessible to us, it is always "the next thing." It never lies out of sight, in the darkness, for God never puts our duty where we cannot see it. The thing we think may be our duty--but which is still lying in obscurity, is not yet our duty, whatever it may be a little farther on. The duty for the moment is always perfectly clear--and that is as far as we need concern ourselves. When we do the little which is plain to us, we will carry the light on, and it will shine on the next moment's step.

If not even one little step of duty is plain to us, "the next thing" is to wait a little. Sometimes that is God's will for us for the moment. At least, it never is his will that we should take a step into the darkness. He never hurries us. We had better always wait than rush on as if we were not quite sure of the way. Often, in our impatience, we do hasten things, which we find after a little while, were not God's next things for us at all. That was Peter's mistake when he cut off a man's ear in the Garden, and it led to sore trouble and humiliation a little later. There are many quick, impulsive people, who are continually doing wrong next things, and who then find their next thing trying to undo the last. We should always wait for God, and should never take a step which he has not made light for us.

Yet we must not be too slow. This is as great a danger as being too quick. The people of Israel were never to march until the pillar moved--but they were neither to run ahead nor to lag behind God. Indolence is as bad as rashness. Being too late is as bad as being too soon. There are some people who are never on time. They never do things just when they ought to be done. They are continually in perplexity which of several things they ought to do first. The trouble is, they are forever putting off or neglecting or forgetting things, and consequently each morning finds them not only facing that day's duties--but the omitted duties of past days as well. There never really are two duties for the same moment, and if everything is done in its own time, there never will be any perplexity about what special right thing to do next.

It is an immeasurable comfort that our duties are not the accidents of any undirected flow of circumstances. We are clearly assured that if we acknowledge the Lord in all our ways, he will direct our

paths. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will guide you on the right paths." Proverbs 3:5-6. That is, if we keep eye and heart ever turned toward God, we never shall be left to grope after the path, for it will be made plain to us. We are authorized to pray that God would order our steps. What direction in duty could be minuter than this? "He who follows me shall not walk in the darkness," said the Master (John 8:12). "He who follows me." We must not run on ahead of him, neither must we lag behind; in either case we shall find darkness, just as deep darkness in advance of our Guide, if we will not wait for him, as it is behind him, if we will not keep close up to him.

Prompt, unquestioning, undoubting following of Christ--takes all perplexity out of Christian life, and gives unbroken peace. There is something for every moment, and duty is always "the next thing." It may sometimes be an interruption, setting aside a cherished plan of our own, breaking into a pleasant rest we had arranged, or taking us away from some favorite occupation. It may be to meet a disappointment, to take up a cross, to endure a sorrow or to pass through a trial. It may be to go upstairs into our room and be sick for a time, letting go our hold upon all active life. Or it may be just the plainest, commonest bit of routine work in the home, in the office, on the farm, at school.

Most of us find the greater number of our "next things" in the tasks that are the same day after day, yet even in the interstices, amid these set tasks, there come a thousand little things of kindness, patience, gentleness, thoughtfulness, obligingness, like the sweet flowers which grow in the crevices upon the cold, hard rocks--and we should be ready always for these as we hurry along, as well as for the sterner duties that our common calling brings to us.

There never is a moment without duty, and if we are living near to Christ and following him closely, we never shall be left in ignorance of what he wants us to do. If there is nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do, at any particular time, and then we may be sure that the Master wants us to rest. For he is not a hard Master, and besides, rest is as needful in its time, as work. So we must not worry when there come moments which seem to have no task for our hands. "The next thing" then, is to sit down and wait.

Chapter 4

Into the Right Hands

"Hold me up--and I shall be safe!" Psalm 119:117

Certain ancient mariners were accustomed to say, as they put out to sea, "Keep me, O God, for my boat is so small--and the ocean is so great and stormy!" There could not be a fitter prayer for a Christian--as he sets out in life. The world is vast and full of perils, and a Christian, even the best, is very weak and frail. He has no ability to face the difficulties, the obstacles, the hardships he must face, if he is to pass successfully through life. The world is large and full of storm and struggle--and only a few get through it safely.

If there were no one greater and stronger than ourselves, into whose keeping we may commit our lives, as we go out to meet the perils--what hope could we have of ever getting through safely? The Christian cannot guide himself. He cannot master the storms. He cannot shelter himself. "Keep of me safe, O God, for in You I take refuge!" (Psalm 16:1) should be his prayer, not once only when he launches his barque--but daily, hourly.

But does God really care for our little individual lives? Does he care for the child that has lost the shelter of human love, and has no one to think of it or provide for it? Does the great God give thought and care to one little child among the millions of the world?

The very thing that Jesus wants to do for us--is to be the keeper of our lives as we pass through the world with its storms and dangers. We do not know what we lose when we keep our lives out of the hands of Christ. No other can make of us what he could make. No other can bring out the powers and possibilities of our being as he can. Our lives are like musical instruments. They have marvelous capacities--but only one who has the skill can bring out the music. Only one who understands our lives, with all their strange powers, can call out their possibilities.

There is a story of an organist in one of the cities of Germany, who one day refused to permit a visitor to play upon his organ. The visitor begged to be allowed at least to put his hands upon the keys and play a few notes, and the old man reluctantly consented. The moment the stranger began to play, the organ gave forth such music as it never had given forth before. The custodian was amazed, recognizing the fact that a master was at his keys. When he asked who it was, the player answered, "I am Mendelssohn." "And I refuse you permission to play upon my organ!" the old man said, in grief and self reproach.

It is said that one day, many years ago, there was an auction in London which was attended by distinguished people. Among other things offered for sale was a Stradivarius violin, more than a hundred years old. The auctioneer raised the violin and held it gently, almost reverently, as he told its story and spoke of its wonderful qualities. Then he gave it to a musician who was present, asking him to play upon it. The man played as well as he could--but the violin in his hands failed to win enthusiasm from the audience.

The auctioneer began to call for bids. But the responses came slowly. Then a stranger came into the room, an Italian. He pressed his way to the side of the auctioneer to see the violin. He took it into his own hands, examined it carefully, held it to his ear as if it had some secret to whisper to him, and then laid it gently on his breast and began to play upon it--and marvelous music at once filled the room. The people were strangely affected. Some smiled, some wept; every heart was stirred. It was Paganini, the great master, whose fingers were on the strings. When he laid the instrument down, the bidding began again, and there was no trouble now in selling it. In the hands of the first player--the qualities of the violin were not brought out, and men did not know what a treasure was being offered to them. But in the hands of the great master--its marvelous powers were discovered and brought out.

Our lives are like violins. In the right hands they will give forth wonderful music. But in unskillful hands, their powers are not discovered. It is strange with what lack of thought and care, many people entrust their lives into the hands of those who cannot bring out the best that is in them--and oftentimes of those who only do them harm. This is seen in the recklessness which many young people show in choosing their friends. Indeed, they do not choose their friends at all--but let themselves drift into association and intimacy with any who come their way. The influence of friendship is almost irresistible. The admission of a new companion into our life is the beginning of a new epoch in our course. If the friendship is pure, inspiring, and elevating, if the friend is one who in his own character will set before us new visions of beautiful life, and in all his influence over us will prove inspiring, the day of his coming to us will ever be a day to be remembered. But if the new friend is unworthy, or if his hands are unskillful, nothing good can come from his friendship. His coming into our life is a tragedy.

Young people should seek association with those who are wiser and more experienced than themselves, those who can teach them lessons they have not yet learned, lead them in paths they have not yet walked in, and help them to find their own powers and possibilities. It is a great mistake merely to choose a friend with whom to have a good time, one who will flatter us and make us feel satisfied with ourselves, one with whom we may get on pleasantly. We should have friends who, like Paganini with the Cremona, can discover and call out the best that is in us. "Our best friend is he who makes us do what we can."

It is the same with the teachers to whom we may go. There are those who have wisdom enough to teach, and who honestly do the best they can with those who come to them--but who lack the mental vision to discover the faculties that are in their pupils, or who lack the ability and skill to bring out their possibilities. There are other teachers who may know less themselves--but they have the power to find the talents that are in their pupils, and then to call them out.

The same is true of the value and influence of books. There are books which we may enjoy reading, and which may give us entertainment and pleasure--but which leave in our minds no new knowledge, no stimulating of thought, no new visions of beauty, no wonder to impel us to advance, and no strengthening of character. On the other hand, there are books which stir our hearts, which wake us up, which kindle in us upward inspirations, and which incite us to the attaining of better things. These are the books we should read, for they will give us the help we most need if we are to grow into fullness of life and power.

But whoever or whatever we may take into our life--Christ should always have the first place as Master, Guide, and Friend. No other one knows the capacities that are in us, and no other can find and bring out these capacities and train them for the highest service. Into Christ's hands, therefore, we should commit our lives for teaching, for discipline, for the developing of their powers. Then we shall reach our best, and realize the divine thought for us.

Christ alone, is able to keep our lives. He is the Master of all the world. He met every power and conquered it. He faced all evil and overcame it. We never can find ourselves in the hands of any enemy, who is too strong for him. One of the most beautiful ascriptions in the Bible is that which says: "To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy--to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore!" In all this world's dangers, he can guard our lives from harm, and he can present us at last without blemish.

Christ alone, is able to guide us. The world is a great mass of tangled paths. They run everywhere, crossing each other in all directions. Hands are forever beckoning us here and there, and we know not which beckoning to follow. Even friendship, loyal as it may be, sincere and sympathetic as it is, lacks wisdom and may guide us mistakenly. There is One only whose wisdom is infallible, whose advice never errs--and he is our Guide. There is a little prayer in one of the Psalms which pleads: "Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul." Psalms 143:8. This prayer, if sincere, will always be answered. We may see no hand leading us. We may hear no voice saying, as we walk in the darkness, "This is the way--walk in it." Yet if we seek divine guidance and accept it implicitly, we shall always have it.

Not only do we have keeping and guidance in Christ--but everything we need on the way--and then eternal blessedness! We may commit our lives into His hands with absolute confidence. He will take us with all our faults and our sins--and will keep us from hurt in all the perils of the way. He will lead us in the right

path amid all the confusion and tangle--and then He will then bring us to glory!

Chapter 5

Living Unto God

"Settle it in your heart that the sum of all business and blessedness, is to live to God." John Wesley

"The glory is not in the task--but in doing it for Him." Jean Ingelow

The object of our life determines its character. What we live for--tells what we are. If a man's aim is to get rich, if that is the ruling motive of his life--greed for gold is his absorbing passion. If a man lives to do good to his fellow men, if this is his single purpose, the desire will inspire all his thoughts and actions.

It is interesting to put ourselves to the test to discover just what the real purpose of our living is. When we know this we can tell where our life is tending, what it will be when it is finished, what impression we are making on the world, and what our living means to God.

That which distinguishes a Christian life from others--is that it is God's. We belong to God. To live to any other, therefore, is disloyalty and idolatry. Paul in one of his epistles, asserts this truth very strongly. He says, "None of us lives to himself, and none dies to himself. For whether we live--we live unto the Lord; or whether we die--we die unto the Lord; whether we live therefore, or die--we are the Lord's."

All our relations are with the Lord. To him we owe our full obedience--we have no other master. It is his work we are doing, whether it be what we call secular work, or whether it be what we consider religious work. In all our acts, words, thoughts, feelings--we are living to the Lord--if we are living worthily. We may not be conscious of this relation--but whether we are or not, it is to the Lord that we are living. We may not think definitely of God every time we speak, every time we do anything--but if we are sincere our desire always is to please God, to honor him, to have his approval. It is to the Lord that we must answer in judgment. "We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God--each one of us shall give account of himself to God."

The truest life, is that which is lived most fully and unbrokenly unto God. Jenny Lind said, in accounting for the motive and spirit of her wonderful singing, "I sing to God." She meant that she looked into God's face, as it were, and consciously sang to him. She did not sing to the vast audience that hung on her words and was held spellbound by them. She was scarcely conscious of any face before her but God's. She thought of no listening ear but God's. We may not all be able to enter into such perfect relation with God as did this marvelous singer--but this is the only true ideal of all Christian life. We should do each piece of work for God. The business man should do all his business for God. The artist should paint his picture for God. The writer should write his book for God. The farmer should till his ground for God. This means that we are always engaged in the Father's business, and must do it all in a way that he will approve.

Jesus was a carpenter, for many years working at the carpenter's bench. We are sure that he did each piece of work for his Father's eye. He did it skillfully, conscientiously, beautifully. He did not skimp it, nor hurry through it, so as to get away from the shop earlier.

What a transformation it would make in all our work if we could say in truth, "I do it for God." Now this is not an impossible ideal for Christian life. It was this that Paul meant, in part, at least, when he said, "To me to live is Christ." He was living in Christ. He was living for Christ. His life was all Christ--Christ living in him.

He had the same conception of Christian life when he wrote, "Whether therefore you eat, or drink, or whatever you do--do all to the glory of God." Even our eating and drinking are included in this high ideal. The sins of gluttony and intemperance in drinking are condemned. We must also eat healthfully: eat to live--and not live to eat. To do anything to the glory of God is to do it so that it will reflect the divine glory, and be for the divine honor. This is part of what Paul meant when he said, "We live unto the Lord."

It is possible to follow the guidance of conscience in all things, doing always what is right--and yet not live unto the Lord, not to have any consciousness of God, any sense of a personal God, any thought of God at all, in what we say or do. It is possible to accept the Christian moralities as our rule of life, following them even in the smallest things--yet not be living unto God, not even believing in God nor having any love for him. When the singer said, "I sing to God," she meant that she thought of God as she sang, and poured forth her song directly in praise and love to him. So we should seek to do all our work for God.

There cannot but be a wonderful inspiration in living in this way unto God, if we make it real. It is not always easy to work under those who are over us. Sometimes they are unjust, unfair in their treatment of us, unkind toward us, tyrannical in their exactions of service or in their manner of enforcing their commands. It is easy for us to fret and chafe when we have to endure severity or unkindness in the performance of our daily tasks. But it changes everything, if we are conscious of another Master, in back of the human master, and remember that he is the one for whom we really are working. He is never unfair or unjust, never severe or harsh. We can work joyfully with him and for him, unaffected by the hardness or the inhumanity of the human master who is immediately over us. We may bear the harshness, the injustice, the unkindness we have to endure, if it is our duty to stay in the place, seeing ever the eye of Christ, with its love and sympathy, looking upon us and enduring all the harshness for him.

Paul exhorts servants to be obedient to their masters--"as servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart." "Whatever you do," he says, "work heartily, as unto the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that from the Lord you shall receive the recompense of the inheritance: you serve the Lord Christ." It makes the most trying service easy, when it is done in this way--but looking beyond the human master and seeing Christ as the real Master, for whom we are working. We are living unto him. We are serving him. From him we shall receive the reward for our faithfulness.

Paul speaks in this same connection of dying. It does not seem strange to hear him say, "Whether we live--we live unto the Lord." But when he goes on and says, "Whether we die--we die unto the Lord," the words strike us as unusual and startle us. Dying does not interrupt nor in any way interfere with our relations to Christ. It is just like any other passage in life. Dying is only a phase or experience of living. We are as really Christ's, when we die and after we die--as we are when we are living. The words are wonderfully illuminating; they throw a bright light on the mystery of dying. We are not separated from Christ in death; the bond between us and him is not broken. When we die we do not pass out of Christ's service; we only pass to another form of service. We have the impression that death cuts our life off, interrupts it, and makes an entire change in everything which concerns us. But the truth is, life goes on through death--and after death very much the same as it did before. There will be nothing greatly new in our experience, nothing strange or unusual, when we are dead. Life and death are all one--parts of the same continued existence. "Whether we live--we live unto the Lord; or whether we die--we die unto the Lord; whether we live therefore, or die--we are the Lord's."

There really is nothing to dread, therefore, in dying. The Old Testament Scriptures represent it as a walk through the valley, the valley of the shadow of death, accompanied by the Shepherd, whose presence

allays all fear and gives peace. In the New Testament what we call dying is a departure from earth, in the companionship of Christ. There is a mystery in it because it is away from all that we know or understand and all that we can see--but there is nothing in it to be dreaded--for it does not separate from Christ for an instant--and it takes the person to Christ to be with him forever. We are to die unto the Lord, with no interruption to our attachment to him, and then continue, in the heavenly life, living unto the Lord. For life will go on with its blessed activities in heaven. Our work may differ in its character--but we shall ever be loving and serving Christ.

Thus our relation with Christ is for all time, through death, and through eternity. He does not become our Savior merely to deliver us in some emergency. Ofttimes this is all that we can do for a man who is in distress or need. We can relieve him for the time--but when the occasion is past he drops away from us, perhaps back into his old trouble, and our relation to him ceases. But when we accept Christ as our Savior it is forever. He takes us into his love and into his life. He establishes a relation with us that never shall be broken. He will never weary of us. We may sin against him--but he will not cast us off. We may be unfaithful to him and may wander far away--but when we repent and creep back to him, he will forgive us and receive us again to the place of love. The marriage covenant has a limitation, for it is "until death us do part." But there is no such limitation in the covenant made between Christ and us. Death will not part us from him. We belong to him in the heavenly life. We are to follow him in this world to the very last, and then forever in the world to come. We are to do the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven, and then continue to do his will when we reach heaven.

Chapter 6

The Indispensable Christ

One of Christ's words to his disciples was, "Without me you can do nothing." If anyone is thinking of giving up Christ, let him wait a moment and ponder the question, whether he can afford to do it or not. What will it mean to him to give up Christ? There are some losses which do not take much from us; there are some friends whom we might lose and be little the poorer. But what would it take out of our life to give up Christ? "Without me," he says, "you can do nothing."

An old writer tells of dreaming that a strange thing happened to his Bible. Every word in it that referred to Christ had faded from the pages. He turned to the New Testament to find the Gospels, and found only blank paper. He looked for the prophecies about the Messiah, which he used to read, and they all had been blotted out. He recalled sweet promises which he used to lean on with delight--but not one of them could be found. The name of Christ had faded from every place where once it had been. What would it mean to us to find ourselves some day without Christ, to find that we had lost him, to look for him in some great need and find that we do not have him anymore?

There is a striking little story by Henry van Dyke, called the Lost Word. It is a story of one of the early centuries. Hermas had become a Christian. He belonged to a wealthy and distinguished pagan family. His father disinherited him and drove him from his home when he accepted the new faith. From being one of the richest young men in Antioch, he was now one of the poorest. In the Grove of Daphne one day he was sitting in sadness by a gushing spring, when there came to him a priest of Apollo, a pagan philosopher, who, seeing his unhappy mood began to talk with him. In the end the old man had made this compact with Hermas. He assured him of wealth, of favor, of success, and Hermas was to give him only a word--but he was to part forever with the name of Him he had learned to worship. "Let me take that word and all that

belongs to it entirely out of your life, so that you shall never need to hear it or speak it again. I promise you everything," said the old man, "and this is all I ask in return. Do you consent?" "Yes, I consent," said Hermas. So he lost the word, the Blessed Name.

He has sold it. It was not his anymore. He went back to Antioch, to his old home. There he found his father dying. For hours he had been calling for his son. The old man received him eagerly, said he had forgiven him, and asked his son for his forgiveness. He then asked Hermas to tell him the secret of the Christian faith which he had chose. "You found something that made you willing to give up life for it. What was it you found?" The father was dying and his pagan belief gave him no comfort. He wanted now to know the Christian's secret. Hermas began to tell his father the secret of his faith. "Father," he said, "you must believe with all our heart and soul and strength in -" Where was the word? What was the name? What had become of it? He groped in darkness--but could not find it. There was a lonely soul, crying out for the Name--but Hermas could not tell even his own dying father what it was. The word was lost.

Love came into his life and happiness was heaped on happiness. A child was born to him. But in all the wondrous joy something was lacking. Both he and his wife confessed it. They sought a dismantled shrine in the garden and Hermas sought to pour out his heart. "For all good gifts," he said, "for love, for life, we praise, we bless, we thank -" But he could not find the word. The Name was beyond his reach. There was no one to thank. He had lost God.

The boy grew into wondrous beauty. One day Hermas was victorious in the chariot races. Then he took his boy in the chariot and again drove round the ring to show him to the people. The tumult frightened the horses and they ran away. The child was tossed off and when his father turned to look for him, he was lying like a broken flower on the sand. His distress was great. Days passed. "Is there nothing that we can do?" said the mother. "Is there no one to pity us? Let us pray for his life." Hermas sank on his knees beside his wife. "Out of the depths," he began "- out of the depths, we call for pity. The light of our eyes is fading. Spare the child's life, O merciful -" But there was only a deathly blank. He could not find the Name. The word he wanted was lost.

This story has become true in actual life thousands of times. People have given up the name of Christ, sold it for money, or pleasure, or power, or sin. Then when times of need came, and they turned to find help, there was only blankness. In a home there is some great distress. One is near unto death, and friends want to pray for him. But they cannot pray. In childhood they were taught the words. "Our Father," but long since they have lost the holy Name, and now, when they would give worlds to go to God--they cannot find the way.

In all the world, there is no sadness so deep as the sadness of one who has lost Christ and then in some great need is trying to find him. There is no ear to hear. It is a fearful thing to give up Christ, to lose him. "Without me you can do nothing."

We must not press these words too far. Of course there are certain things men can do who are without Christ, who have no connection with him. There are people who are very useful, benefactors to others, who never pray, who do not love Christ. One may be an artist and paint lovely pictures, pictures which the world will admire, and yet may not believe in Christ, or even think of him. One may be a writer and prepare beautiful books which shall interest others and enlighten, cheer, and inspire many lives to noble deeds--and yet really disregard Christ, be altogether without Christ. One may be a patriot soldier, fighting the battles of freedom or country, or a statesman leading his land to honor--and yet not know Christ, nor

be able to get to him. A man may be a good father, kind to his family, making his home beautiful with the loveliest adornments, and rich with refinement and gentleness, providing for his children not only things their bodies need--but providing also for their mental needs and cravings--and know nothing of Christ. There are homes of luxury and refinement, homes of culture, in which there is no prayer, where Christ is never welcomed as a Guest. There may be natural affection, father love, mother love, love of husband and wife, love of friends--yet no love for Christ.

When Jesus says, "Apart from me you can do nothing," we must understand his meaning. He does not say we cannot live good lives, cannot be good merchants, good lawyers, good teachers, good fathers and mothers--but what he means is that we cannot have the joy and blessing of spiritual life--we cannot do the things of God.

The relation between Christ and his friends is closer than any human relation. No one can say to any friend, "Without me you can do nothing." The mother cannot say it to her child. It is a sore loss when the mother of a baby is taken away--but how sore a loss no words can explain. Even God cannot twice give a mother. No other one, however loving and tender in spirit, however gentle in care, however wise in guiding and helping the young life--can be to it all that its own mother could have been. Yet even the best and holiest mother cannot say to her child, "Without me you can do nothing." The child, though so bereft, lives and may live nobly without a mother.

There are other earthly friendships that become so much to those to whom they are given that they seem to be indispensable. The trusting, clinging wife may say to her husband, who is being taken away from her: "I cannot live without you. If you leave me, I will die. I cannot face the cold winds--without your shelter. I cannot go on with the tasks, the cares, the struggles, the responsibilities, the sorrows of life--without your comradeship, your love, your cheer, your strong support, your brave confidence and wise guidance." So it seems to her as she stands amid the wrecks of her hopes. But when he is gone--the strong man on whom she has leaned so confidently, she takes up the duties of life, its cares, its trying experiences, its tasks, its battles--and goes on for long years with splendid faithfulness and great bravery.

"I never dreamed that I could possibly get along as I have," said a woman after a year of widowhood. Then she told of her utter faintness when she realized that she would no more have her husband's comradeship. She had never had a care or a responsibility unshared by him. As she turned away from his grave it seemed to her that now she was utterly alone. But Christ was with her. Peace came into her heart, calmness came, and then courage began to revive. She grew strong and self-reliant. She was a marvel to her friends as she took up her work. She showed resources which none ever dreamed she had. Her sorrow had elevated her. She lived and lived grandly now, without the one who had seemed essential to her very existence.

So we learn that no human life however close it has been is ever actually indispensable to another life. To no one, no human friend, can we say, "I cannot live without you." The taking away of the human, reveals God.

But note what Jesus says, "Apart from me you can do nothing." As the vine is essential to the life of the branch, so is Christ essential to us. We cannot meet any of the serious experiences of life, without Christ. A wonderful change came upon the disciples as they lived with Christ, heard his teaching, let his influence into their lives. They were transformed. They never could have done anything without Christ.

Do without Christ! You do not know what Christ has been to you, even when you were not aware that he was your Friend. You think he has not been doing anything for you, when, in fact, he has been crowning you with loving kindness and tender mercies all your days. If we were to lose Christ today out of our life, as Hermas in the story lost him, if his name were utterly blotted out, his friendship and help taken utterly from our life--what a dark, sad world this would be for us! Think of going out tomorrow to your duty, struggle, danger, responsibility, without Christ, unable to find him in your need. Think of not having Christ in your day of sorrow! Think of dying without Christ!

But we do not have to do without Christ. Only by our own rejection, can we cut ourselves off from him.

Chapter 7

The One Who Stands By

Spirit of God, descend upon my heart;

Wean it from earth; through all its pulses move;

Stoop to my weakness, mighty as You art,

And make me love You as I ought to love.

Teach me to love You, as Your angels love,

One holy passion filling all my frame;

The baptism of the heaven descended Dove,

My heart an altar, and your love the flame.

Jesus spoke to his disciples of the Holy Spirit, as the Paraclete. The word used in our translation is Comforter. The name is very beautiful and suggestive. We think of a comforter as one who gives consolation in trouble. There is much sorrow in the world, and there is always need of those who understand the art of comforting. Not many do. Job spoke of his friends, who came to offer him consolation in his great trouble, as "miserable comforters." They certainly were. Their words as he heard them, were like thorns. They only added to his suffering. There are those in every place who want to be comforters. When they see one in pain or in tears they think they must comfort him. So they begin to say things which they suppose they ought to say. They are sincere enough--but they do not know what they should say. Their words give no strength; they only make the grief seem deeper, sadder, and more hopeless. They are mere empty platitudes; or they misinterpret the sorrows of their friends. That was what Job's "comforters" did.

There is constant need for true comforters. Barnabas is called, a "son of consolation." No doubt he was a sunshiny man. No other one can be a consoler. When Barnabas went into a sick room, we are quite sure his presence was a benediction. When he visited the homes of those who were sorrowing, he carried the light of heaven in his face, and his words were full of uplifting. It is a great thing to be a son or daughter of consolation. Christ himself was a wonderful comforter. The words he spoke were words of eternal truth on which we may lay our heads, and find that we are leaning on the arm of God. No doubt, too, the Holy Spirit is a comforter. He brings the truth of eternal life to those who are bereft. He brings the gentleness and healing of divine love to hurt hearts. The name of Comforter describes well one kind of work the Spirit

does in the world.

But the best scholars agree that "comforter" is not the word which most fully and clearly gives the sense of the Greek word which our Lord used. It is Paraclete. The word is used only a few times in the New Testament, and only by John. In the Fourth Gospel it is always translated Comforter. Then in John's First Epistle, it is translated Advocate. Advocate is perhaps the more accurate translation--not merely a comforter who consoles us in trouble, and makes us stronger to endure sorrow--one who stands by us. The word Advocate is very suggestive. One of its meanings is a person who stands by; strictly, a person called to the side of another. The thought of one who stands by is very suggestive.

It may be said that this is one of the finest definitions of a friend that could be given. He must be one who always stands by you. This does not mean in a human friend that he must always be close to you, always manifesting affection in some practical way, always speaking words of cheer. He may be miles away in space--but you know that he is always loyal to you, true to you, your friend wherever he may be. He always stands by you. He may not be able to do many things for you. Indeed, it is but little that a friend, your best friend, really can do at any time for you. He cannot lift away your load--no other one can bear your burden for you. Each one must bear his own burden. Each one must meet his own life's questions, make his own decisions, endure his own troubles, fight his own battles, and accept his own responsibilities. The office of a fr

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