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Choosing the Noble Life [String-Bound Sermons]

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Choosing the Noble Life, -

Why should one choose the noble life? Is there any noble life? Is there any reason or sense in thinking that one kind of life is more to be desired than another. Why should you and I make any effort to be noble? Why should we not steal, if by so doing we can gain more of the things which bring us comfort, ease and luxury? Why should we not lie, and cheat in our conduct with men, if by so doing we can advance our own interests, and become the greater possessors of wealth and power? Why should we refrain from injuring another person if the suffering of another would in any way enhance our own

comfort, and welling! Is there any²
reversion in our standards of volubility
and goodness, standards which
demand of us certain exactments
as to conduct?

But go one step more. Do we
as a matter of fact live a good
~~by~~ noble life? Or are we merely
conventionally good; doing those few
things which seem expedient to
us in our efforts to maintain a
certain relationship with our fellow-
men. In our conduct guided by
anything more than a selfish
animal desire to ~~to~~ get and beget
~~without~~ at the least forcible outlay
of labor, and expense, and hoping
for the greatest forcible return, do
we maintain our standards of
conventionality according to the
law of supply and demand, or

and never regard the question of ³
real virtues worth at all, or is there
really some sound moral sense of nobility
and goodness within us. that is
the organizing unit of our lives?
I do not ask whether our lives are
perfectly noble, or entirely virtuous
and without blemish, but I simply
ask whether there is any evidence
at all of nobility, of sound moral
worth in our nature, such as would
elevate us above the low plain of
selfish greed, or conventional wrongness
and enable us to choose a noble
life, and order our conduct in
accord with the standard of
nobility.

Of course I can see very easily
that there are certain givings and
tinalities which give the appearance
of moral worth. I see among people

of a church a certain tendency to
help, and assist each other, to recog-¹⁴
nize, the worth and value of each
other persons for his own sake, but
I observe also that this appearance
of virtue, and ~~for~~ brotherly love, is
in general conventional, rather than
-wreal, outside of the fold of the
few, each one seems bound free
to refuse to help, to positively
injure another, if by so doing
he gains one iota of power, or
wealth. We find that some
good love and kindliness
among thieves. One thief will
hardly rob another, although
they count it high love to suc-
cessfully rob a stranger. One
is reminded of the chimerous
days of the highwayer, who

15

robbed the rich, and gave alms
to the poor, as he views ~~the~~ the con-
duct of many of the fiends of
modern industry. Among these
robbers there is a certain honour,
which forbids them to touch or
injure the person of the craft, but
when they are outside of the craft
all is fair, and the spoils of the contest
fall into the hands of the victor,
while the one who has been defeated
by a hairs breadth is left to die
of hunger and thirst.

Indeed it is very easy to paint
the picture of our life in very
dark colours, and very deep shadows.
I might indeed show you that every
man has his price, and will sell
his soul for a man of fottage
or even for a less price than

That, I might as the pessimist ¹⁶
does lead you into the dark and
gloomy corners of society and
present for your inspection, the
the greed, and the selfishness, and
the hypocrisy of men, until you
would cry with the worst bitter
pessimist, all is wrong, all is
black, all is foul, except you and
I. You would then suspect me,
and I should suspect you, but
of all the wonderful world about us
the only ~~for~~ person whose suspicion
is on our selves.

So you I might present you with
this gloomy picture, and leave
you beneath the cloud of suspicion
thus created, but I am not going
to do so, because it would
be false, because it would

be only the faint outline of life
the world as ~~seen~~ ~~expressed~~ recorded
on an unexplored scurrying globe.

Go ^{to} that very Jesuit, and begin
to search him, and diagnose his
troubles. You will find that he
believes that he himself sees with
a true eye, and regards himself
as living a noble life, of unquestio-
ned honesty. If you press him with
inquiries about his nearest friends
you will find that he regards them
as about as honest as himself. They
may have a few little faults that
cast a shadow enough over them to
wake them of interest, but they are
after all is said and done men of
very fine quality, and integrity.
He believes in them because he
knows them. The people whom

he knows only by hearsay, those are &
the black and unregenerate
and lost beyond redemption.
Mr. A. of unquestionable integrity
knows Mr. B. very intimately. In
the opinion of Mr. A. Mr. B. is an
exceptionally fine man. in fact
a remarkably good, noble person.
No! Mr. A. does not know Mr. D
very well, but knows enough
to throw a suspicion over him.
As for Mr. X. he is a worst life less
scoundrel. But Mr. B. of un doubted
excellence, knows Mr. C. a very
fine honorable man. Mr. C. knows
Mr. D. regards Mr. D. as a
unusually high type of wicked.
Oh yes. Mr. D. knows Mr. X. Strange
how people should ever come

to suspect Mr. X, Mr. D. for know I
him for years, and while he has
not had all the advantages of life
that many have had, he is at least
one of the finest, and most
whole soul'd men that Mr. D.
ever knew.

Thus it goes, your Jesuit is simply
blinded by a fog, which prevents
him from seeing clearly the people
who are a short distance from him.
Trace the outline of his block and
gloomy world, from war to war,
and you will find your way
into the prisons, into the dark
and hidden hells of life, and
even there you will find that
there is a spark of nobility in
the clod, that the most degraded
will at times become noble.

20

and is not without his confessor, who
will declare that in spite of the
blackness of his life, he is at heart
one of the finest men that ever
lived. So when we get outside
of the narrow confines of our provin-
cialism, and really break down
the high board fence of our back
yard, and come to know the
things that live in the Alley, we find
that after all is said and done, the
world is not so black as it is
painted. The man who says that
all is wrong, and that nature
is defiled, is either sick or
ignorant. When the light of
knowledge is turned on, you find
that the fog disappears.

That is why I have not going
to paint the picture black, and
tear out of our minds the things

11

that make life rich and wholesome.
We may call the cheer-board of life
black, we may call it white, imper-
fect, and uncompleted is this world
we live in, imperfect and im-
completed are the people who live
there; but even in the dark is the
spark of nobility, and life itself
speaks of greatness. Life's experience
that lift us out of the gloom of
pessimism, into the healthy
vital atmosphere of activity. ~~We~~
We are leaving behind the faith
that rests upon false gods, and
mild imaginations of a superstitious
youth, and entering upon a faith
in the reality of a world ordered
by a great good will. ~~Dr~~ Jesus

12

of Nazareth looked upon the world of
Palestine ~~two~~ years ago, and saw there
the same kind of a nature that we see,
a humanity, less perfect, more animal,
more corrupt, more selfish, ~~degraded~~
and inactive, and delinquent than
we see to day. - ~~as~~ he looked upon
all this, and saw there the evidence
of an outward reality, to which
corresponded to the inward ideal
of his mind, and ~~he~~ accepted
a faith, and chose a noble
life based upon this faith, that
like of the field speaks to us, of
that the heart of ~~our~~ law of
nobility speaks in us, and that
the father and son work together
for the attainment of an end

113

ordered by the great unseen good-
will, whom he called father.

We to-day are entering upon a new
life faith, resting not upon
these some great truths, that nature
speaks to us, that Freedom speaks
in us, and the universal speaks
through us.

In this faith we chose to live
the noble life, rather than the
ignoble, the unselfish life
rather than the selfish, the
free life rather than the unfree,
not because we fear an eternal
punishment, not because we
are told by priest or church, not
because it is expedient, not
because it brings pleasure
and comfort. Not because

our own nature, our own experience
 on our inward being speaks
 to us of nobility. That inward
 consciousness of ~~the~~ the greatness
 of war, that voice of duty, which
 has ~~infallibly~~ been the ruling power
 of every noble life, that spark
 of the Divine within the chest,
 which gave the Spartan Hero
 courage, and compelled the
 Spartan mother as she sent her son
 to war to come back with his
 shield, or on it; that spark of
 nobility which her sent wrong
 a warrior to the stake, and
 wrong a hero to a noble death.
 that spark which, however fine
 have been the flocks of foreign
 and brutally in all the ages

115

Soe always held its place in human
life, and soe always been
the ~~#~~ former that has done the
work of the world; that still speaks
to us, tho still thrills of with
the form of a great mission, still
bids us consecrate ourselves to
a noble, even though it be at
the cost of suffering. Never
would war be won, did he
choose the good life out of fear
for the unctions of the evil, or
the commands of the good gods,
but war is won when he chooses
the good ^{noble} life, because he feels
within him the infalling con-
sciousness of the dignity, the nobility
the divinity of his own nature.
War is won when he chooses

116

the noble life, because he feels
the force of the true bourned truth
of "noblesse oblige." ~~to~~ when
he feels that his nature is to
voble to be ignoble, to great
to be mean; to fine, to be stained,
to vobole to be chagged in
the mind; when he feels that he
is called to to great a work, to
to guard a mission, to ~~to~~ allow
himself to waste the precious
moments in wasteful and degrading
indulgences, ~~to~~ when he feels
himself too voble, too divine too
self respecting to enjoy the ~~fruits~~
satisfaction of his own desires
to indulge in and luxury, when
he knows that his own satisfaction
is purchased by the suffering

and degradation of work another. 117

~~Because you are weak.~~ In these days when the voice of the gods of Childhood is dying, when the superstitious fear of punishment no longer works ~~as a whip~~, as ~~we~~ serves as a whip to lash the coming child into obedience and order. In these days when we are passing from the old restraints, to the new ideals, of work and accomplishment, we are called with the great voice of duty from within, and crying need from with^{out} to choose the noble life, not merely the conventionally good life not merely the life that conforms to existing standards of morality

and twenty and service, but the ⁷¹⁸
noble life which shall keep us =
bid a noble being. In business
to choose the noble life that shall
never permit us to diminish one
hair's breadth from the conduct
which belongs to a noble being.
In labor to choose the noble life
which shall not permit
us by act of omission or commission
to fall one inch below the high
standard of noble obligation. In
social relation to choose the noble
life, that shall not permit us
to injure, or crush even the least
of our fellow men. For long
we have been living under
the impression that were

119

is a degraded, deformed human
being, and ~~the~~ whose only hope
was to escape by some mechanism
a life of temporal ~~or~~ degradation
and eternal punishment. Let
us leave that sad and gloomy
~~fantasy~~ night ware behind us.
The spirit's spark that enlivens
the clod is divine, In the
image of the great god will
we be fashioned, too noble
to debase ourselves, too great
to listen to the echoes of the
my gone age, Before us are
great and noble deeds to be done,
fine, and sweet lives to be lived,
lives worth of him who bears
the image of Divinity in his

20.
very nature, out of fear, out
of superstitions, obedience. I would
never ask one to clove the noble
life, but out of the greatness of our
nature, with its infinite possibilities,
we choose the good life. This is the
great need of to day. ~~that~~. From every
corner of the civilized world we
hear the soughs of destruction of
that house of a religion, built upon
the shifting sands, ~~the~~ of time
of superstition. What turmoil and
strife may attend its downfall we
do not. But to day when the
sands are being washed away
from the foundations, by the great
flood of modern life, the call
is for a man and woman who

shall still stand upon the ancient
foundation, where all the prophets of
history have stood. where Jesus
of Nazareth stood, where every
great teacher has stood, and
proclaim as of old, that truth which
is the experience of every noble
life. Which expressed it in these
words. "What doth the Lord require
of thee but to do justly, and to
love mercy, and to walk humbly
with thy God. Jesus expressed
it in these words. Thou shalt
love the Lord thy God with all thy
heart, and with all thy mind
and with all thy soul, and thy
neighbor as thyself." Emerson
because he believed that virtue

speaks to us, and the Freedom (22)
speaks in us, and the overwe
speaks through us, again uttered
the same great truth. Against
they self at first hand with
Society!

We who can discover the laws
of nature, we who can feel the
force, and the thrill of fellowship
with hummer beings, and penetrate
the inner secrets of luminosity, we
who can feel the mystic presence
of the unseen, think you we
are ~~born~~ born to live a life of
degrading self-indulgence, and
ease. Every noble instinct
infolke of your nature answers
you no? a thousand times no. The
wells of within you that charge

(2)

mysterious form with which leads
you out of the very nobility of your
being choose the noble life, and
work together with the three
Goodwill for the realization of
that new heaven, and new earth
where the dim, and vague outlines
of which are never entirely out of
the range of our vision.

Choosing the Noble Life

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Mr. Carl E. Davis
Billerica,
Mass.



Choosing the Noble Life

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

April 1, 1906¹

Why should one choose the noble life? Is there any noble life? Is there any reason or sense in thinking that one kind of life is more to be desired than another? Why should you and I make any effort to be noble? Why should we not steal, if by so doing we can gain more of the things which bring us comfort, ease and luxury? Why should we not lie, and cheat in our conduct with men, if by so doing we can advance our own interests, and become the greater possessors of wealth and power? Why should we refrain from injuring another person if the suffering of another would in any way enhance our own comfort, and well-being? Is there any sense in our standards of nobility and goodness, standards which demand of us certain exactments as to conduct?

But to go one step more. Do we as a matter of fact live a noble life? Or are we merely conventionally good, doing those few things which seem expedient to us in our efforts to maintain a certain relationship with our fellow men? Is our conduct guided by anything more than a selfish animal desire to get and beget at the least possible outlay of labor, and expense, and hoping for the greatest possible return? Do we maintain our standards of conventionality according to the law of supply and demand, and never regard the question of real virtuous worth at all, or is there really some sound moral sense of nobility and goodness within us that is the organizing unit of our lives? I do not ask whether our lives are perfectly noble, or entirely

¹ Nine sermon manuscripts were collected together in a string-bound package, this one among them. This manuscript was distinctive in that it was in an envelope with a precise date, April 1, 1906. This date, along with the similarities in paper and the fact that all were hand-written, is the basis on which I have dated all of the manuscripts in this string-bound package to 1906.

virtuous and without blemish, but I simply ask whether there is any evidence at all of nobility, of sound moral worth in our nature such as would elevate us above the low plain of selfish greed, or conventional norms, and enable us to choose a noble life, and order our conduct in accord with the standard of nobility.

Of course I can see very easily that there are certain group conventionalities which give the appearance of moral worth. I see among people of a church a certain tendency to help and assist each other, to recognize the worth and value of each other's person for his own sake, but I observe also that this appearance of virtue and brotherly love is, in general, conventional rather than moral. Outside of the pole of the few, each one seems free to refuse to help, to positively inspire another, if by so doing he gains one iota of power or wealth. We find that same group-honor and kindness among thieves. One thief will hardly rob another, although they count it high honor to successfully rob a stranger. One is reminded of the chivalrous days of the highway man, who robbed the rich and gave alms to the poor, as he views the conduct of many of the pirates of modern industry. Among these robbers there is a certain honor, which forbids them to touch or injure the person of the croft, but when they are outside of the croft all is fair, and the spoils of the contest pass into the hands of the victor, while the one who has been defeated by a hair's breadth is left to die of hunger and thirst.

Indeed it is very easy to paint the picture of our life in very dark colors, and very deep shadows. I might indeed show you that every man has his price, and will sell his soul for a mess of pottage or even for a less price than that. I might, as the pessimist does, lead you into the dark and gloomy corners of society and present for your inspection the greed and the selfishness and the hypocrisy of men, until you would cry with the most bitter pessimist, "all is wrong, all is black, all is foul, except you and I." You would then suspect me, and I should suspect you. Out of all the wonderful world about us, the only person above suspicion is our own selves.

I say I might present you with this gloomy picture, and leave you beneath the cloud of suspicion thus created, but I am not going to do so because it would be false, because it would be only the faint outline of the world as recorded on an underexposed sensitive plate. Go to that very pessimist and begin to search him, and diagnose his troubles. You will find that he believes that he himself sees with a true eye, and regards himself as living a noble life of unquestioned honesty. If you press him with inquiries about his nearest friends you will find that he regards them as about as honest as himself. They may have a few little faults that cast a shadow enough over them to make them of interest, but they are, after all is said and done, men of very fine quality and integrity. He believes in them because he knows them. The people whom he knows only by hearsay, those are the black and unregenerate and lost beyond redemption. Mr. A., of unquestioned integrity, knows Mr. B. very intimately. In the opinion of Mr. A., Mr. B. is an exceptionally fine man, in fact a remarkably good, noble person. No! Mr. A. does not know Mr. D. very well, but common report throws a suspicion over him. As for Mr. X. he is a most hopeless scoundrel. But Mr. B., of undoubted excellence, knows Mr. C., a very fine honorable man. Mr. C. knows Mr. D., regards Mr. D. as an unusually high type of manhood. Oh, yes. Mr. D. knows Mr. X. Strange how people should ever come to suspect Mr. X. Mr. D. has known him for years, and while he has not had all the advantages of life that many have had, he is at heart one of the finest and most whole-souled men that Mr. D. ever knew.

Thus it goes. Your pessimist is simply blinded by a fog, which prevents him from seeing clearly the people who are a short distance from him. Trace the outline of his black and gloomy world, from man-to-man, and you will find your way into the prisons, into the dark and hidden hovels of life, and even there you will find that there is a spark of nobility in the cloud, that the most degraded will at times become noble, and is not without his companion who will declare that in spite of the blackness of his life, he is at heart one of the finest men that ever lived. So when we get outside of the narrow confines of our provincialism, and really break down the high board fences of our back yard, and come to know the things that live in the alley,

we find that after all is said and done, the world is not so black as it is painted. The man who says that all is wrong, and that nature is depraved is either sick or ignorant. When the light of knowledge is turned on you find that the fog disappears.

That is why I am not going to paint the picture black, and blot out of our minds the things that make life rich and wholesome. We may call the chessboard of life black. We may call it white. Imperfect and uncompleted is this world we live in. Imperfect and in uncompleted are the people who live there. But even in the dark is the spark of nobility, and life itself speaks of greatness, hopes, experiences that lift us out of the gloom of pessimism, into the healthy vital atmosphere of activity. We are leaving behind the faith that rests upon false gods, and wild imaginations of a superstitious youth, and entering upon a faith in the reality of a world ordered by a great goodwill. Jesus of Nazareth looked upon the world of Palestine years ago and saw there the same kind of a nature that we see, a humanity, less perfect, more animal, more corrupt, more selfish, and inactive, and delinquent than we see today. He looked upon all this and saw there the evidence of an outward reality which corresponded to the inward ideal of his mind, and accepted a faith, and choose a noble life based upon this faith, that [the] lily of the field speaks to us, that the law of nobility speaks in us, and that the father and son work together for the attainment of an end ordered by the great unseen goodwill, whom he called "Father." We, today, are entering upon a like faith, resting upon these same great truths, that nature speaks to us, that freedom speaks in us, and the oversoul speaks through us.

In this faith we choose to live the noble life, rather than the ignoble, the unselfish life rather than the selfish, the pure life rather than the impure, not because we fear an eternal punishment, not because we are told by priest or church, not because it is expedient, not because it brings pleasure and comfort, but because our own nature, our own experience, our own inward being speaks to us of nobility. That consciousness of the greatness of man, that voice of duty, which has been the motive power of every noble life, that spark of the Divine within the dark which

gave the Spartan hero courage, and compelled the Spartan mother as she sent her son to war to come back with his shield or on it, that spark of nobility which has sent many a martyr to the stake, and many a hero to a noble death, that spark which, however fierce have been the floods of passion and brutality in all the ages, has always held its place in human life and has always been the power that has done the work of the world; that still speaks to us, still thrills us with the power of a great mission, still bids us [to] consecrate ourselves to a noble [life], even though it be at the cost of suffering. Never would man be man did he choose the good life out of fear for the results of the evil, or the commands of the gods. But man is man when he chooses the noble life because he feels within him the impelling command of the dignity, the nobility, the divinity of his own nature. Man is man when he chooses the noble life because he feels the force of the time-honored truth of "noblese oblige," when he feels that his nature is too noble to be ignoble, too great to be mean, too pure to be stained, too valuable to be dragged in the mire; when he feels that he is called to too great a work, to too grand a mission, to allow himself to master the precious moments in wasteful and degrading indulgences, when he feels himself too noble, too divine, too self-respecting to enjoy the satisfaction of his own desires to indulgence and luxury, when he knows that his own satisfaction is purchased by the suffering and degradation of another. In these days when the voice of the gods of childhood is dying, when the superstitious fear of punishment no longer serves as a whip to lash the cowering child into obedience and order, in these days when we are passing from the old restraints to the new ideals of work and accomplishment, we are called with the great voice of duty from within, and crying need from without, to choose the noble life. Not merely the conventionally good life, not merely the life that conforms to existing standards of morality and honesty and service, but the noble life which shall keep unsullied a noble being. In business, to choose the noble life that shall never permit us to deviate one hair's breadth from the conduct which belongs to a noble being. In labor, to choose the noble life which shall not permit us by act of omission or commission to fall one inch below the high standard of noblese oblige. In social relations, to choose the noble life, that shall not permit us to injure, or crush even the

least of our fellow men. Too long we have been living under the impression that man is a degraded, depraved human being, whose only hope was to escape, by some mechanism, a life of temporal degradation and eternal punishment. Let us leave that sad and gloomy nightmare behind us. The spark that enlivens the cloud is divine. In the image of the great goodwill are we fashioned, too noble to debase ourselves, too great to listen to the echoes of the bygone age. Before us are great and noble deeds to be done, pure and sweet lives to be lived, lives worthy of him who bears the image of Divinity in his very nature. Out of fear, out of superstitious obedience, I would never ask one to choose the noble life. But out of the greatness of our nature, with its infinite possibilities, we choose the good life. This is the great need of today. From every corner of the civilized world we hear the sounds of destruction of that house of a religion built upon the shifting sands of superstition. What turmoil and strife may attend its downfall we know not. But today when the sands are being washed away from the foundations, by the great flood of modern life, the call is for men and women who shall still stand upon the ancient foundation, where all the prophets of history have stood, where Jesus of Nazareth stood, where every great teacher has stood, and proclaim as of old, that truth which is the experience of every noble life. Micah expressed it in these words, "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."² Jesus expressed it in these words, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy soul, and thy neighbor as thyself."³ Emerson, because he believed that nature speaks to us, and freedom speaks in us, and the oversoul speaks through us, again uttered the same great truth, "Acquaint thyself at first hand with Deity."⁴

We, who can discover the laws of nature, we, who can feel the power and the thrill of fellowship with human beings, and penetrate the inner secrets of humanity, we, who can feel the mystic presence of the unseen, think you we are

² Micah 6:8.

³ Matthew 22:37-39.

⁴ This quote is from the 1838 Harvard Divinity School Address by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).

born to live a life of degrading self-indulgence and ease? Every noble impulse of your nature answers you, "No! a thousand times no." There wells up within you that strange mysterious power which bids you out of the very nobility of your being, choose the noble life, and work together with the unseen Goodwill for the realization of that new heaven and new earth, the dim and vague outlines of which are never entirely out of the range of our vision.