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Pittsfield, Unity Church, 1905-1919

4-1-1906

## Choosing the Noble Life [String-Bound Sermons]

**Earl Clement Davis** 

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choosing the workle Life, -Inly should one shows the worke Life.? Is there any volle life. Is the any reason is sense in thinking that one kind of life is were to be desired the everther. Why shortel you and I woke any effort to be voble! July should me vot steal, if by so doing we can gain were of the things which thing us confut, ease and luxury.? July should we not lie, and cheat in our conduct with men, if ity so doing me en advence on over interest, and became the greater forserror of wealth and former, toly shorted we refrain from ingining another ferson if the suffering of another would in any way subvice our own

comfort, and wellings. Is the any reuse in our standards of volibly and goodneing stundards which devovd of us certain exactaments. or to conduct.? But go one stepwer. Do we ps a worther of fort line a good If volle life? the are me merely comentially good; doing thre few things which seem enfectient to us in our effects to maintain or Rectain relationship with on feelings men. In our soriclust quided by anything war thon a selfish aniwal desire to the get and heget without at the least fourtle outly of lobor, and expense, and hoping for the greatest for the return, Ir we maintain our standards of conventionability according to the low of suffly and demand, or

and never regard the question of 3 real nintrons worth ot all, or is there really some sound word seure of wokilly and gordner within us. that is the organizing mil-of orm liver! I do not ask whether one lives are ferfeetly volle, or entirely winteres and without Hewish, but Isingly ask whether there is any swiclause at all of wohility of some word with in our notice, such as world elevote us above the low flain of selfish greed, or evaneutrobol wormers and evolle us to choose, a noble life, and order our conduct in accord with the standard of whilely. Of course I can see very easely. that there are sectain georgeonen: timolitis which give the offearance of words with; I see aming feefle

of a church a cutain tendency has heef, and assist each other, to very = mize, the worth, and volve of each other fersom for his own rake, but dobserve also that this offersauce of winter, and for botherly love, is in general conventional rather three - wird, Outside of the fole of the few. eoch ne seems bound fre to refuse to heef to faiturely ingine another if by so cloning he gains one ista of former, or wealth. We find that some goof lover and kindliver away theires. The theif will hardly robewother, although they count it high bovor to suce senfoly not a stranger. One is reminded of the chimelous days of the highwayun, when

robbed the rich, and give alims to the for as he views to the con's dust of wany of the firster of worken inclusting, away there robbers there is a certain bourn, which forbids their to touch or rigine the ferror of the croft, but when they are ontride of the right all is feve, and the spoils of the content four into the borch of the wictor. while the one who ha hear depoted by a hour broulth is left to the of lunger and thuist. Indeed it is very easy to faint the fictive of our life in very don't colour, ovel very def stodows I winght indeed stormyon that every win has his frire, and will his some for a weer of folloge or even for a less frice Thom

Thot, I suight as the fersionist closs lead you into the dark and glowing corners of society and fresent for your insfection the The greed, and the selfishners, and the hypocroey of men, until you world suy with the wort hitter fersimist, all is mong, all is Hoch, all is foul, except you and I for world then ovafeit me, and I should surfect you, Unt of all the worderful world about is the only ferson above sufficien is on our selves. I soy I wight present you with this glooning ficture, and leave you hereath the clovel of surfacin thus wested, but I am vot going to do so, because it works he folse, because it world

be only the faint outline of the the world as men effect recorded on an underexfored secritice flots. Ho that very ferimint, and begin to search him, and diagnose his twotles. for mill find that he behines that he himself sees with a true eye, and regards him self as diving a voble life, of unquestan = ed brusty, If you freez him with inquiries about his nearest friends you will find that he regards them as about as hart as him alf, they way have a few little faults that cost a stodown everyh over them to wohe them of interest. Int they are after all is said and dere men of very five quality. and integrity. He believes in them because he Rooms Them. The feafle whom

be known only by heavy, those are 8. the block and unregenerate and lost beyond reilenften. The R. of unquestionable integrity horus Tur. B. new intimotely, In the fire ion of Thu. C. Tur. B, is an exceptionally five won, in fort a resvirkably good, voble, fersen. Wo! Mr. a. Does vot hvor Tur. D very well but convin reffert theories a surficien over him. as for Mr. X. he is a wort befoler scoundhol. But m. B. of unchotes ysellever, Novus Mu. E. a very fine towordle won. Un. C. Kvorus The De Pagarde hu. De, as are werswelly figh type of wontood. all yes. Un. & hours hu X, Shaye how feafle should ever come

to surfect hu. X. hu. De hor Moure ? him for years, and while he has vot bol oll the advortige of life theway her bol, he is at heat one of the finest, and wort whole sorted were that hu, &, ever Men. Thur it goes, you fericult is singly blinded by a fog, which frements him from seeing clearly the figle who are a shot slistove from him. Lines the orthine of his block and glowing world, from wore to wow. and you sail find you way into the frisins, into the clock and hidden hvel of life, and even there you will find that there is a spark of wobility in the clock, that the wort degeached mill at times become valle.

and is not without his conforman, who will declare that in spite of the blackner of his life, he is othert one of the finest wen the even lived. For when we get outside of the warver renfines of one fevries: Riolism, and really break chown the high board fencer of our bock yeard, and some to know the things that live in the ally, me find that after old is said and due, the world is not so tlack as it is fainted. The wen who sorp that all is wriving, and that nature is defloved is either sich or ignorant. When the light of Rowledge is timed are, you find that the for diroffears. Hot is why I have are vot going to faint the ficture black, and seve out of our minch the things

that worke life rich and wholsome We way call the cher board of life Hack, we way collit-white, olyfer pet, and unconflited is this would me line in duferfect and in : correspond are the ferfle who live thee, but even in the clock is the spenk of robbly, and life itself spoks of quatuers, byles expensive that lift us out of the gloom of fersimisms, into the healthy nital atworther of activity. It Me are leaving behind the faith that rests ofon folse gods, and swild imaginations of a suferstitions youth, and entering upon a fait in the reality of a world ordered ga quat govel: will. De ferus

of Troyoreth tooked upon the world of Polistine two years ogo, and sow there the some kird of a notine that we see, a humily, less ferfeit, were animel. worr compt, worr selfish, dyald and inactive, and delinguout thes we see to dry - as he worked upon all this, and sow there the enidence of an ontwood reality, to which corresponded to the in word ideal of his mired, and the accepted a faith, and shows a noble life bosed upon this faith, that lily of the field year to us, of that the heart of work low of vobility of each incer, and that the folker and son work together for the attainment of an evel

ordered by the great unseen goods wiel, whom he called fother. WE to-dry me entering upon a sur like failt, resting wet ifor ufon there some great truths, that water spools to us, that Freedom apale in us, and thousand speofse though us. In this faith we shows to line the work life, rother then the igorble, the mollfiel life wither the selfirly of the five life withen the imfine, vot because me fear an eterol furishment, vot became me are total by friest or church, not because it is expectient, not became it brings flearme and comfort. Int because

our own nature, our own extensive on our inward heing afeats to us of volility. That indewed consciouses of of the quatures of wore, that voice of chity, which has imfelle her the working former of every voble life, that fack of the Divine within the shal. which gave the Efaction Hero comage, and complled the Efection wither or she sent haven to wor to come bock with his shild, or ouit; that your of while her sent wony a wortige to the sloke, and wony a hero to a woble death. that spark which, however fine home been the flevels of foreign and butality in all the oges

Doe always held its flow in human Afr, and for whomy & heen the # former that has dire the work of the world; that still spoke to us, the still thills of with the form of a great wining stel hids us consecrate ourselus to a voble, even though it he at the cost of suffering hene world war he was chiel he chase the good life out of fear for the servets of the evil, or the commanch of the goods gods. but won is wen when the cloves the good life became he feels within him the impolling com = cowd of the diguity, the volility the clinicity of his own water. Then is were when he choices

the volle life, because he fiels the force of the time bound touth of where thise! to when he feels that his water is to voble to be grobbe, toget to be wear; to five, to be stamed. to volvoble to be chaggerh in the wire; when he full that he is called to too quot a work, to tor gravel a uniin, to toollow himself to waster the fecious woment, in westeful and dequeling inchelgences, to when he feels himself to volle, too divine too seef respective enjoy the fruits sotisfoction of his own deries to inclulgence and lixery, when he knows that his own sotisfation is furchased by the suffering

and degredation of who another. Herman man 15, In there shys when the voice of the Joch of Childebook is dying. when the sufunctions fear of furthert vo longer worker the which, are me enter server as a whif to lash the comering child introbed: ieuce and order, din there drys when we are fairing from the old restaines. In the new ichols, of work and accomplishment, me are colled with the great voice of duty from within, and orging weed from with to clove the voble life, but weely the commentially good life vot weely the life the kenforms to existing stimularch of wordty

and bounty ovel service, but the noble life which stoll keep word: hist a worke hering. In trisiners to choose the worke life that shall never fermit-us to climiole crie hais breath from the evolut which belongs to a volle being. on loon to chove the workle life which stoll vot fernit us by act of ownsin or commision to fall one inch below the high studard of Where oblige. In social relation to chone the while life, that sholl not fermit us to injure, or crush even the least. of our fellow wer, for long we have hew living under the imperior that were

is a degraded, deferred hum being, and too where one life was to except by some weeking a life of temford go degudotan arel eterre fruishment. Lit us leave that sach and gloring fright night ware behind us. The ofinite spark that enhieus the clock is chime, In the moge of the great good well are we fashioned, too works to debose ourselves, too great to lite to the selver of the my gone age, Before us are great and wohle deech to be clone. fine, and smut lives to be lined. lives with of him who hear the image of Divinity in his

very wortne. ant of fear, out 20. of suferstituins obeclieve Iwould wever ant one to clove the worke life, but out of the quatries of our wature. with its infinite freihibles. me chose the good life. This is the great need of to dry. That, From many come of the civilized world we hear the sounds of destruction of that home of a religion, built ofon the shifting sands . The of time of sufustition. Noht turnil and strife way attend its dumpoll we wo vot. But to sky when the sauch are being worked among from the foundations, by the great flood of worlen life, the soll is for so man and women who

shell still struck upon the auceint foundation, where all the furfets of history have stored. where years of Twy weth stord, where severy great tooker for stood, and ferelain as of old that truth which is the experience of every workle life, wich expended it in there worch. What sloth the lovel regime if the but to disjirtly, and to love wery, well to wolk hutly with they fach, Jesus, expensel it in there words. Show shall love the Irel thy god with ill they heart, and with all thy wind and with all they sure, onel they veighbor as thy self." Emerson became be believed that votus

spoke to us, and the Freedom 2 speaks in we, and the overwell spoker though us, again uttered the some great truth. agraint they self at first hand with We who are discover the loves of votue, we who can ful the former, and the thill of fellowship with humon beings, and furtiste the inner secrets of humority. me who can feel the mystic ference of the unseen, think you me are for bour to line a life of degrading seef inchequere. and ease. Every voble astit infohe of your voture ausmers you ho, a thousand Times Too, The well of mithingon that share

suptaines former with which lucks you out of the very wohilely tof your heing chase the workle life, and work together with the threen Goodwill for the realization of that new heaven, and new earth who the clim, and vogue orthings of which are never entirely out of the range of our ruring.

Pittsfill Lyn. 1, 1900 Choosing the noble Life Wash AV l & Dance Dillemea-More

Choosing the Noble Life
Earl C. Davis
Pittsfield, MA
April 1, 1906<sup>1</sup>

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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> 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 kindliness 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 if 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 if 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

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Micah 6:8.

 $<sup>^{3}</sup>$  Matthew 22:37-39.

 $<sup>^4</sup>$  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.