

Some Helps by the Way

Earl Clement Davis

No Date¹

Scripture:²

Text:

Not to grovel in the dust, not to fly in the air, but to walk erectly, strongly, and unflinchingly, with our feet always on the solid ground is the high mission of the human soul. Not to lose one's self in the cares, the work, the worry, the passions of appetite and desire; not to lose one's self in the ethereal regions of unbounded imagination and {??} but to walk calmly and quietly upon the earth, doing those things that duty calls us to do, and transforming and transfiguring the world by the strength and nobility of our lives, that is the mission of life.

Yet in our attempts to fulfill that mission we forget many of the safeguards that might help us, and ignore many of the helps by the way that are indeed most simple. We have a duty to perform, and in the moment, we fail, and are disappointed and disheartened because of our failure. We are brought face-to-face with some temptation, and become worried with remorse because we're not strong enough to withstand the allurements of some indulgence, meanness, or dishonesty. Suddenly as out of a clear sky some incident happens which changes us for a moment from a man or woman into a passion-controlled animal, out of whose mind has passed for a moment all the high and enobling powers which commonly distinguish the man from the animal. Day after day we see ourselves fall short of the mark which we set up for ourselves. The little things come up and defeat us. The hid things come up and defeat until it seems that we are no

¹ While this manuscript has no date, the paper used is consistent with other dated sermons from Earl Davis' time as a student at Harvard Divinity School.

² Curiously, while "Scripture:" and "Text:" appear in the manuscript, both are blank.

stronger than the blade of grass that bends quite to the ground in the gust of wind, and finds itself erect again only in time to feel the blast of the same wind. Quick words, careless thoughtless neglect, nervous excitement discouragement, all these seem at times to be the lot of every man, no matter how much he desires to have his life run smoothly, and always to be man enough to rise above the endless number of things that disturb a life. These are the common tests of daily life, and we fail in them because we do not avail ourselves of the helps by the way.

When I look at the portrait of a man like Emerson, and see those expressions that mark calm, simplicity, refinement, high-thinking and noble living, I see the results of the long slow process of a great soul molding and fashioning in the plastic clay of the human body, a portrait which represents the finished product of a great sculpture. I do not ask just what is material man, I only know that the finished product is witness to and the result of the highest and noble aspirations of a great soul.

Or look at the portrait of a man of another type, as Henry VIII of England. In his face you can see written the results of a selfish, sensuous life of self-indulgence. Only too plainly does his face tell us the tale of his life, and bears witness to his long years of groveling in the dust. Not less accurately did the inner man of Henry VIII slowly and laboriously portray in every line of his face the purpose and aim of his selfish soul, than did the inner soul of Emerson reveal itself in the tender delicate lines of his face. There they are, the two portraits, the one course, gross, sensuous, the other, refined, kindly, pure in every part.

As you walk along the street, scan the passing faces. Each one tells the tale of the soul within. Now one is softened by the lines of care and sorrow; another is hardened by selfishness and sin; one is radiant with joy and happiness, another is deformed by cruelty and bitterness. Do I ask them to tell me the kind of life they live? No! Only too plainly their inmost nature is being revealed by the subtle influence of their thoughts and desires upon the plastic clay of their faces. Could the soul of Emerson have produced a face like Henry VIII, or

could the soul of Henry VIII have molded a face like Emerson? The face is the mirror of the soul, and that idea brings us into the light of a great truth potent for good or evil in the life of each one of us according as we make it a living vital truth of life, or simply know of it as one of the interesting bits of knowledge.

Carry that truth one step beyond what we have already seen. Notice that on the street the aimless shiftless face goes with the aimless shiftless ways of walking. The very carriage of the despondent hopeless man pictures to us the kind of expression we shall see, even before the face can be observed. The firm steady carriage goes with the strong powerful face. The quick nervous step betrays the face marked by lines of worry and anxiety. Not the face alone but the whole body is the mirror of the soul. Slowly imperceptibly the habits of thought in the mind are working their subtle influence in molding, and maintaining the health and strength of the body. Every thought that comes into the mind is bound to express itself in some part of the body, just as the purpose to lift my hand results in the proper muscular activities to bring about that result. The smile that flits across the face, the expression of anger, disgust, impatience that shows itself in the slightest movements of the muscles, are witnesses to what is going on all over the body, changing, remolding lines and muscles, slowly making them conform to the thoughts and ideas that are most frequent in our minds.

But even beyond our bodies extends this subtle influence of the soul, and does its work in making the world we live in into the image of the world of ideas that lives in us. We cannot have within us a world of selfishness and greed unless in the slow process of time we stamp the world without with the imprint of the selfishness and greed that is within, and make our contribution to the world's work in that kind of product. We cannot be unselfish and noble within unless in time we impress the power of our personality upon the lives about us, and make a contribution towards bringing in the Kingdom of God. We cannot serve two masters. In the long run it is impossible to be a hypocrite. The man who is bad at heart is bound to tell his secret sometime. Slowly, steadily day-by-day, we are molding our faces, our bodies, our worlds into the

image of that which is within us, and the inmost secrets of our lives are be[ing] proclaimed from the house tops. We can no more escape the influence of these inward thoughts upon our lives than Lady Macbeth could wash the stain of blood from her hand. Emerson makes an Emersonian world, and Henry VIII makes an England of turbulence and immorality. Jesus of Nazareth brings in the Kingdom of God.

But fact are facts, and the truth is that we cannot make the world we live in to suit our fancies, and our dreams. Long before we come to a realizing sense of having any influence upon the world about, the conditions under which we are to live are quite accurately determined. In the world where we would have peace, joy, purity and unselfishness, we find contention, sickness, pain, and sin. What are we to say to it?

We do not even have much to say about our own lives, and bodies until we have become so old that it is but with great difficulty that any change could be wrought. Our habits in large part, our dispositions, the characteristics of our body are determined to a large extent before we have come to a realizing sense of their importance to us. Our nasty temper, our fearful disposition, our slothful habits are things which are thrust upon us, and we cannot help it, if they do lead us into trouble and pain.

It is true that we cannot make the world to our liking. But we can control our thoughts. We can stimulate our minds with the highest and noblest thoughts and conceptions of what life ought to be. When we are living in the midst of pain and hardship, and struggle, we can let light in upon our darkness by opening the windows of the mind, and letting the light of great powerful soul-stirring thoughts come in. Above the cares and anxieties of life there is forever open to us the real world of pure thinking, in which we can share in all the truth of life that the Infinite God has revealed unto us. We need not be learned, we need not be versed in the fields of higher education, but simply to turn our mind toward the good and noble things that surround us, and there in the freedom of the spirit build our world of thoughts. We are free to direct and control our thoughts.

But we have already seen that the thoughts that are habitual with us, the inmost hopes of the soul will in the course of time remold and transform ourselves into the very image of those thoughts; that they will have power towards remolding and making the world into the image that is within us, even as God made man in his own image. To do that, to make our natures over into the likeness of our highest and best ideals of man, to help make the world that we find about us and in which we live over into that ideal world that lives in us, that is the mission of life. We are free to have high noble thoughts, and high noble thoughts make grand men and women, and grand men and women make the Kingdom of God.

Yet in spite of the fact that we know these truths, and realize the vital force and power of them—realize that they are truths that are potent for the happiness and strength of our life, and its final success—yet we almost never avail ourselves of the helps which are about us on all sides, helps that we might and ought to use to assist in our life mission. If we have some task to perform that requires extra physical strength, we never think of beginning it without first taking nourishment of some kind that will keep well-supplied the sources of strength in our body. Each morning the first duty is to attempt to meet the demands that our work is to make on our physical strength by furnishing fuel for the body. Who would imagine himself strong enough to do the work day-after-day without this supply of food? Yet, how often do we, who are so careful about getting ready for the struggles of the physical work, how often do we make any such preparation for meeting the thousand and one difficulties that are bound to beset us in the course of our daily work. We never seem to think that our mind may be hungry, and need food; we never seem to think that our moral nature may be exhausted and need stimulating, we never seem to think that the whole soul may be longing for some strengthening, quickening, nourishment that would enable it to meet the difficulties, to overcome the temptations, and to walk calmly and quietly through the day's duties. Whether it is in the home, or at the place of business, the one who accomplishes the results, is the one who has a clear calm mind. To begin a day's work with the mind clouded by worry, by petulance and nervousness, is just as certain to bring irritating incidents, and

disturbing accidents to the day's work, as exhaustion and fatigue are sure to result without proper bodily nourishment. We admire, almost envy, the person who can quietly and peacefully go through the day, doing vast amounts of work, making everyone about happy, never disturbed or fretted. Yet we fail to become such persons, and constantly have cause to regret many of the things that we do, and bewail over some hastily spoken word, some lost opportunity for doing what we would wish. The truth is all these things happen because we have not taken the necessary precautions, beforehand, and enter upon our daily duties but poorly nourished for the constant demand that is being made upon our mental, moral and spiritual natures.

We can never make our inmost souls over into the kind of a soul that lightens the world we live in as by a divine light unless by constant and persistent discipline we deliberately supply the soul with its proper fuel, and exercise that control which we may exercise over our thoughts. In the days gone by our New England ancestors used to begin the day with family prayers. I like to try to picture to myself these strong and sturdy people assembled together for a moment of mental and spiritual preparation for the day's work. But in time these became more formal than spiritual, and were given up very largely. Yet the essential truth for which they stood is one of the greatest needs of today. I cannot feel that a prayer which is a pure prayer, can always be regulated with such nicety as to be always the fit, and best form of spiritual and moral uplift that we need. The best, the finest, the most powerful is that which is unexpressed, and is the secret longing of the finite soul for more of the truth and power of the Infinite. But we can always, with the utmost sincerity, begin our day with some moment which shall give us a spiritual uplift. I like the reply which the Skotch [sic] Highlander gave to a traveler who came to his cottage early in the morning. The traveler coming into view of the cottage saw the man standing just outside of the door, his hat in his hand, as if in quiet meditation. Feeling instinctively as if he were treading upon Holy Ground the traveler stopped, and apologized for disturbing the man's devotion. "No, I was not praying," he said, "but I like to come out here in the early morning, and bare my head before the beauty and glory of the world. I feel better for it

all the day." Perhaps it was unconscious knowledge, but that man had gotten hold of the secret of all noble living, and had penetrated to the very lowest depths of true devotion and prayer. I have a friend, a man of large business affairs, who is very deeply interested in art, and has in his home an unusually good collection of great paintings. Every morning before going to business he spends a few minutes among his pictures, because, he says, they go with him all through the day. That is the kind of spiritual uplift that we need. A moment of quiet contemplation, be it in the presence of a picture, a bit of nature, a few flowers, or in reading some poem of beauty and uplifting force. However hard the duties are, however much of temptation we must overcome, we are better prepared to live the whole day through, if we but strengthen, and nourish our moral and spiritual nature by such simple honest sincere moments of devotion. They are the silent, unuttered prayers, that reach out into the Infinite, and secretly bring back into our souls the light and strength which will keep them pure, that they may mold our faces into mirrors that shall reflect inner purity, our bodies into bodies of strength, and health, and the world we live in into a world of calm, and love and high purpose.

It is only by constant practice, many failures, many discouraging hours, that the musician becomes able to play upon the strings of his instrument, and produce harmonious inspiring music. It is only by constant effort, with many failures, many hours of discouragement, that the human soul is able to express the inner truths of life in a life, that is harmonious, beautiful, Divine. But if we train and discipline our whole nature as the musician trains and disciplines himself, by and by the music of life will be played with perfect harmony, and as accurate true, goodness, refinement, strength, will control us within, and mold the body into the image of a strong healthy soul. The deeds and words [that] flow from us into the outer world as music seems to flow from the tips of the piano player's fingers. Not to grovel in the dust, not to fly in the air, but to walk steadfastly along the way of life, connecting and transforming all the cares, duties, labors of life, together with its pleasures, and joys, into one harmonious {???}.