

The Motive Power of Vision

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Scripture: Exodus 3:1-12; Revelation 21:1-7.

Text: Revelation 21:1, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; ..."

Last Sunday I tried to lay emphasis upon the plain everyday duty of having a job, i.e., of doing something for someone. I tried to bring out the manliness and the nobility of such work. But at best there was an atmosphere of something lacking in that conception. I have no doubt that many asked themselves, "Why? Why all this work?" I can see that I must work, but what is there of permanent value to inspire me and lead me through the hardship? We saw the apparent necessity of doing one's everyday doing, and doing it well, but still there linked in our minds that ever-present, "Why."

Today I want to suggest what seems to me to be the supplement, an idea that makes our conception of work more complete and rational.

We hear so much in these days about doing the things that lie nearest at hand; of looking out for the present and letting the future take care of itself, that one wonders sometimes if we have not adopted as our motto of life those attractive lines of Omar Khayyaam, "Take the cash, and let the credit go. Now heed the roar of a distant drum."²

¹ According to the notes on this sermon, in addition to delivering it in Danvers of March 1, 1903, Earl Davis also delivered it at Harvard's Appleton Chapel on March 2, 1903 and in Marshfield Hills on September 20, 1903.

² Omar Khayyaam (1048-1131) was a Persian polymath, mathematician, philosopher and poet. This verse is from Edward Fitzgerald's 1859 translation of Khayyaam's verse into English, *Rubalyat of Omar Khayyaam*, Verse Quatrain 23, Fitzgerald Stanza XIII.

We have revolted very strongly from that old conception that this world is a place of horror, sin and wickedness, that life here is at best but an evil, to be endured rather than to be cured. The old conception that it is our duty to turn away from the world, to keep our lives pure and unspotted from its evil influences, to turn our backs upon its joys and pleasures, in order that we may enjoy a greater pleasure a fuller life in the hereafter. That old conception, I say, is no longer tenable. We have cast it aside as irrational in light of the plain facts of life.

We begin to see that this world with all its wickedness, sin and suffering is not wholly bad, and that whether or no we must live here. So we are learning that this world is pretty much the kind of a place we are willing to make it. If it is a world of sin and shame, it is so because we make it so. If it is a world pure and acceptable unto God, it is because we make it so.

More and more our efforts are being turned in the direction of making this present world that we live in a place of purity and nobility. We are placing great emphasis upon the idea of the Kingdom of God upon earth. Our efforts are directed to the duties involved in making life here purer and more noble. We are very largely engaged in efforts to relieve the degrading conditions of the poor, to educate the ignorant, to make our social and political institutions better. We are learning that the good life is lived not by withdrawing from the world, but by entering unto its manifold interests, and making it better.

But in casting aside the old conception, and turning to the new is there not a grave danger of losing sight of and forgetting a great truth that lies at the bottom of the old point of view? Under the inspiration of that old conception, men of history have been able to endure great hardship, to survive great sorrows and afflictions, yes, to meet and welcome most horrible death without fear. For centuries it has been the motive power for heroic living and heroic dying. In casting aside the chaff, may there not be a danger of casting with it some of the good wheat?

While we are confining ourselves to the duties near at hand, while our problems of education, reform and social purity are demanding our attention, there is one factor that we may easily overlook. Does not the motive power, the inspiration for accomplishing all these tasks come from a vision of better conditions, of purer living, or a richer and fuller life in the far away future? Is there not a danger that, as we emphasize the performance of daily duties, we should lose sight of the vision that is the source of all our power for doing? In fixing our eyes upon the ground at our feet, we forget the beautiful landscape which stretches out upon all sides. It is only by looking up from time to time that we can understand the extent and greatness of our work. These momentary glimpses of the future, this [sic] visions of a new heaven and a new earth, are the sources of the great motive power of all activities. We, who have a hard task to perform today, look forward to see the goal towards which we are working, and that vision carries us through the hard commonplace duty because we can see that the performance of the duty is itself towards the realization of the ideal.

The influence of such a power upon the great figures of history stands out in so pronounced a manner that I hardly need to refer to them. Perhaps even now there stands clearly before your mind a picture of the life of Moses, the great law giver. What a beautiful story of the influence of a vision his life presents. The thoughts of Moses in the enjoyment of his own freedom, turned constantly to his people. Israel suffering under the burden and degradation of Egyptian bondage. We can almost see the working of his mind as he brooded over the sufferings and sorrows. Out of the chaos of such gloomy depressing thoughts there suddenly emerges the great vision of the people of Israel living in freedom and honor. Regardless of the stupendousness of his task, Moses, dominated by his new vision, undertakes to free his people. With what results you know. Through hardship and difficulties great enough to discourage a nation, he follows the command of a vision, frees his people, and leads them towards the Promised Land. Moses had seen a new heaven and a new earth in that far away Promised Land. Slowly day-by-day the first heaven and the first earth were passing away; slowly day-by-day the Israelites were being emancipated from slavery.

Great as was the vision of Moses, Jesus of Nazareth had a greater one. Jesus, working at his carpenter's trade, could not keep his mind from dwelling upon the conditions of men and their lives. Slowly, out of his thoughts and his experiences there evolves a great vision. Jesus had a great spiritual insight into the relations of God and man. He saw the dawning of a new Kingdom of God, not temporal, but eternal; not material, but spiritual, a Kingdom of Justice, mercy and love, a Kingdom of the fatherliness of God and the brotherliness of man. It was a great vision, and it took possession of Jesus' life, and controlled his every action. He had seen a deeper grander meaning in life, and the significance of that insight so permeated his life that sacrifice for its realization, even the sacrifice of death, came not merely as a duty, but as a privilege. Jesus lived his life, not apart from the world, but in the world, alive to all the interests of life, and enjoying all the richness and fullness that comes of a life of service and purity, but ever before him was that vision of a deeper and nobler conception of life. It was this vision that inspired him to his noble holy life. To the realization he gave his whole life. Does he heal the sick, his vision leads him; does he make the blind to see, his vision is before him; does he overturn the tables of the money changers in the temple, it is the vision that gives him the courage and the power. "Not my will, but thine be done," says Jesus in the crisis of his life. Jesus did the common everyday things that men and [sic] of his time were doing, but he lived within the influence of the great vision which gave him the strength and courage of the noblest life ever lived.

It is the same story over and over again. Generation after generation of human life has left its imprint upon history through the lives of its great men, who were dominated by a vision. The ancients paid great honor to their seers and prophets, and justly so, for their prophets revealed to them the visions which afforded the motive power of the period. The great leaders of the past have been men of great visions, and progress has been possible because the people have come to see which their leaders saw, and put themselves under the influence of them.

The same thing holds true today. The men who are doing the great things in modern history, the men who are doing the things that will be remembered and revered, are the men who are dominated by the influence of a great vision.

What, for example, must be the [vision] which inspires Booker Washington to his almost superhuman labor? Are not his vision and task as great and as overshadowing as the vision and task of Moses? Here are the millions of negroes in the south suffering in the bondage of ignorance and incapacity. The horror and degradation, the almost utter hopelessness of their condition has impressed itself upon the minds of all our people. Yet out of their very midst arises a prophet who understands their needs. Looking far into the future, this modern prophet has a vision of his people living a life of self-support, and self-respect. Enthused and encouraged by this vision of a new heaven and a new earth, he begins his stupendous task. In less than one generation of men, we see a great beginning which assumes the success of his plans. Booker Washington, lead by this vision, backed by scores of brave supporters in carrying forward a movement, which bids fair to be the most significant reform of the age. It is the motive power of a great vision that is leading them through the most discouraging and disheartening obstacles towards a certain success.

Mr. Jacob Riis, a reformer of another type, is doing a work of far-reaching influence. His knowledge of the conditions of life among the poor in N.Y. enabled him to see the sharp contrast between the lives of the "other half," and the lives of luxury and extravagance. Out of his thoughts there grew a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, in which greater comforts, justice and decency should prevail. Dominated by this vision he begins a reform. Slowly and surely out of the filth and degradation of Mulberry Bend there emerges a condition of more honest living, of higher morality, and better citizenship. The old conditions have passed away under the persistent and powerful leadership of a great vision.

Such visions are dominating the lives of all our great men of today. The motive power of all activity, of all noble life, comes from having a great vision, to which in

moments of discouragement, and moments of doubt we turn for inspiration and guidance. We know perfectly well that such a vision does not lessen the duties of daily life. It rather increases them. But with our minds fixed upon a great vision, with the picture of a new heaven and a new earth before us, will not the obstacles and the difficulties of daily life seem less dangerous and discouraging? Will not the first heaven and the first earth pass away more rapidly?

Such visions belong to you and to me. We, too, look into the future to see a new heaven and a new earth. We, too, dominated by our vision, may transform ourselves from inactivity and dissatisfaction into lives of glorious work and achievement.

As we sit in a quiet evening thinking of some noble life, and dreaming dreams of the kind of noble men and women that we should like to become, are we not aroused to the determination of a greater activity and service? How often, while such a day dream is fresh in our mind, we go to rest determined to do something worthwhile tomorrow. Yet when tomorrow comes, and our vision is thrust into the background by immediate demands, our good determinations are pushed aside with it, and the day passes in the same desultory way that other days have passed. Each day's work would be made more attractive, each burden would be made more light, each sorrow would seem less bitter, if we but allowed that vision of ours to have a greater control of our actions. Somewhere in the secrets of each human soul there is a vision of noble manhood or womanhood, some dream of an hour where one is alone with God, and sees for a moment deep down into [the] mysteries of life. That dream is sacred, and belongs only to oneself. But it should be the guiding power of every moment of our life. It is a vision of our true noble self. Let us give ourselves up to it. It will guide us into noble service, purity and peace.

But there are other visions which belong to all of us in common. We have grave problems of a social and political nature in every town and state of our country. Corruption, dishonesty, bad management, injustice surround us on all sides. At times it seems as if the sum of liberty and honesty would be entirely lost from sight in the fog of

corruption and selfishness. But so much the more puts the burden upon us. We must look into the future, and get a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, of a people among whom honesty, justice and peace prevail, a vision of the Kingdom of God upon earth. Then let us give ourselves over to the leadership, and guidance of that vision. If we live in a town where things are going wrong, let us exert ourselves to new labor, to greater effort, until the things are righted. If we are in a church where the spirit of service is dormant, let us put our shoulder to the wheel, and work, work, work. We have but to surrender body and soul to our vision, and a new heaven and a new earth will begin to appear.

But there is a deeper and a more inspiring vision open to us if we are but awake to it. Moses had a vision of a new social and political life for his people. His vision has been realized, and has passed away. But Jesus had a greater vision with his great insight into human life, and the nature of God, and God's love for mankind. Jesus had a vision of an eternal heaven, which will not pass away. He felt, as you and I feel, that the human soul is not created for a few days, and then to pass away. That was the great vision of his life. Shall we not also hold to that great spiritual vision of Jesus? When we know how true to life were all of Jesus' visions, besides this one, when we remember how in other things which the ages have proved to be true that Jesus had a true and accurate conception of life, shall we not, I say, when we remember all this, hold to this greatest of all visions, the vision of an eternal life? We accept his leadership in other things, let us accept it in this vision which transcends all our knowledge, and all our experience, but which meets a deep constant demand of our soul, which makes life seem real and complete. Here we know in part but there we shall know all. It is a vision that answers every inherent demand in man's nature, which fulfills our heart's desire, and makes life rational. In this great vision of an eternal life of love with God and man, we find the greatest motive power for a life of purity, justice and love.