

Simple Religion

Earl Clement Davis

No Date¹

Text: Micah 6:8, "... and what doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

In our best moments, when we see most clearly into the inner workings of our life, I fancy that we all feel certain that to us at least the religious life is a simple natural life, and I imagine that we all try to formulate into a concise pithy expression our idea of the simplicity and naturalness of the religious life. The President of our own University in one of his characteristic expressions has clothed the idea very simply in saying that "the religious life is an ethical life vitalized by love."² One cannot help feeling that the idea back of those words is the same idea that you and I see clearly enough at times, and the same idea that the prophet Micah is expressing in these words, "and what doth Jehovah require of thee but to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God." These two simple statements give expression to essentially the same idea. The one statement was made 700 years before the birth of Christianity; the other was made within a year. Each finds a response chord in our heart, and is but an echo of the voice of the ages in moments of clearness. Generation after generation, age after age the human soul has been trying to express adequately in outward form this simple idea that the religious life is a simple life.

¹ While this manuscript has no date, it is clear from the reference in the first paragraph to "the President of our University" that this sermon dates from Earl Davis' time as a student at Harvard Divinity School. In addition, there is the notation, "(9) Sermons I" at the top, which suggests that this may have been written for a class.

² Charles William Eliot (1834-1926) was President of Harvard when Earl Davis was a student there, indeed he had a very lengthy and consequential presidency from 1869 until 1909. I cannot find the source of this quotation.

But there is a strange inconsistency about it all. Each statement says that the religious life is simple, but each implies that in the actual world of activity, our simple conception of religious life is buried deep beneath a mass of mystery and unnaturalness. We have to confess that this implied condition is a fact, not only of the earlier days but of our own generation. In the minds of by far the greater fraction of our people, religion is a mysterious, unnatural factor of one's life, about which people may talk, but about which they actually know nothing. There is a strange inconsistency here. We are permitted to see the truth of such a simple statement, but we allow ourselves to go and do otherwise. It seems almost as if we were made to do the things that we would not, and prevented from doing the things that we would. Twenty-seven hundred years ago the prophet Micah said, "What doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God." Could any one state more clearly, more beautifully, more forcefully the simple idea that we like to think is the essence of the religious life?

And yet we have done strange things in the meantime, and we are still doing strange things, whose only result can be to alienate our conceptions of religion from our daily life, and force them apart as things to be attended to at particular times and in particular places. The growth of creeds the accumulation of tradition about the personality of Jesus, the development of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church the worship of a book by the Protestants, the speculative dogmas of theologians; how crude! How foreign! How inconsistent all these things seem in the light of the simple words of the old Hebrew prophet! How unnatural they seem to us in the face of that cherished idea of religious simplicity. But they are facts, nevertheless. So far astray from that simple truth have we wandered that today, in spite of our boastings to the contrary, it still remains true that religion is regarded as mysterious, and unnatural, and the religious institutions which ought to command the highest respect are looked upon with contempt by many noble people, and the problem of the Church is becoming so threatening, that many lose heart, and are willing to give up the fight.

What is the cause of this inconsistency? Why do we see the simple truth and yet ignore it? There can be but one cause in any inconsistency. We are inconsistent because we are insincere, because we are not truthful, because we are not frank.

Let me try to make clear what I mean. We cherish and revere our great heritage of knowledge and institutions; we honor and praise the noble personalities who have been important factors in developing the civilization which we enjoy. We realize how dependent we are upon all the past, and we do well to guard carefully these sacred things that have been transmitted from generation to generation until we hold them in trust.

But even in this honor, even in this reverence for the past we are open to grave charges of insincerity and untruthfulness. One has only to think of the manner in which we treat the great men of a recent generation, yes, even of our own day, to realize this truth. Until within a very few years our great patriot Washington has been so enveloped with legend and fiction, that we will nigh lost the real man. WE may be charged with insincerity and dishonesty when we allow our conceptions of so noble a man to become so distorted and perverted that a writer sees fit to publish a book entitled "The True George Washington."³ If I have any adequate idea of the real nobility of the man, I am sure that he would condemn any tinge of untruthfulness which might be involved in our conceptions of him. If we are to pay a just tribute to his manhood, and honor him sincerely we must discover the true man, and not construct a false one. Another very apparent illustration of this danger was seen in many of the addresses and lectures delivered recently on the life and work of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Many of the lectures, indeed, were very frank and open in presenting to us the real Emerson, but one has to admit that others were about [as] disgusting in their attempts to picture him in terms not altogether truthful and honest. If there was one thing upon which Emerson

³ Undoubtedly the book Earl Davis refers to is *The True George Washington* by Paul Leicester Ford (1865-1902) first published in 1896, and remarkably still available in a 10th edition published by Good Press in 2019.

insisted it was truth. If we would do him proper respect, we must honor the real Emerson.

These two illustrations make clear I hope what I want to say. We do not deal honestly with the great men of the past. We cloth them with an authority which they never had, and do not question the truthfulness of their utterances. It is this kind of insincerity and untruthfulness which is keeping religion enveloped in its cloud of mystery and unnaturalness. If I rightly estimate the spirit of these men, they would say to us, "We have been truth seekers, and if we have found a truth we are thankful, and are gratified in the honor you pay us. You are truth seekers. If you find truth in our lives, take it, but if you find error there, in the name of the common humanity for which we have worked, in the name of God whom we love, cast it aside." It is this kind of insincerity and untruthfulness that is keeping religion apart from daily life, and forcing men of deep religious natures to declare against religion.

Indeed this same insincerity is with us in dealing with institutions which are a part of our heritage of the past. In spite of the fact that we boast of our freedom from tradition, and assert that we have cast aside all the needless outward forms that in their day seemed to express religious ideas, it still remains true that in the eyes of most people the religious life is looked upon as mysterious and unnatural.

We have not been entirely honest in casting aside the old shell that once contained a truth. We proudly assert that no longer do we regard the church as a necessary piece of mechanism, through whose mysteries we may become one of God's elect. We claim to have cast aside that dogma, and yet many of our churches require a statement of belief of such proportions, that not a few deeply religious souls would be excluded. We still carry along with us a part of the old shell which we say has been discarded. The result is we have a church not of God's elect, but of man's elect. The idea of the church as a place of worship is a survival of the old mythical conceptions that the gods like men had particular dwelling places. We say that we have cast aside that idea. We constantly affirm that we worship God not in a place, but in our lives. That God is ever present, and by

noble thought, and noble deed is God worshipped. Everyplace is therefore a place of worship. But as a matter of fact, while we may be most worshipful in our churches, the moment we get outside of them, we no longer have the same spirit. We desecrate the work that we do, by doing it poorly, we desecrate our place of business by being dishonest, we desecrate our fellow men, the true temples of God, by our relations with them. If we really believe that God is in everything, and that we are in touch with him every moment of our lives, why can we not live accordingly?

We are bold enough to say that the church is an association of men trying to help each other to lead a good pure life, but you know and I know that those who have sinned, and sinned deeply get a cold shoulder in most of our churches. We are still the saved elect.

I am not saying these things to be critical and pessimistic, but simply to show that we are not so sincere and honest in dealing with our heritage as we sometimes imagine we are. I am certain that those who have been important influences in developing these institutions would urge us to be more frank and more sincere. They would urge us to accept only what is of value to our higher life, and discard all else. Let us pay due respect to these institutions for their usefulness in giving expression to our idea in an earlier age. But let us take the idea and cloth it to suit our own needs and conditions. I hope that I have made myself clear in what I mean when I say that the strange inconsistency between what in our best moments we understand religion to be, and what in our actual life we show it to be is due to a persistent insincerity and untruthfulness. It is this insincerity that envelopes religion in mystery.

But to go back from whence we started in spite of appearances to the contrary, I still believe that our deepest conception of religion is fully expressed by Micah, "What doth Jehovah require of thee but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God." That is our idea of a simple religious life, and to free ourselves as much as possible from external forms, and to interpret that simple truth in terms of our daily life, is our final interest tonight.

In the language of today I fancy that morality in its broad sense would cover the meaning of doing justly. To do justly would be to lead a life in accordance with well-established ethical principles. One would have a clear consciousness between right and wrong, and would live the right. He would recognize the rights of others, and act accordingly. To live what we call a straightforward manly life, faithful in the performance of duties, brave in time of danger, sincere and frank in our relations with each other, that, I fancy, is what you and I mean by doing justly. That is the kind of life we are trying to live, or at least it is the kind of life that [we] would like to live, and that we expect others to live. It is the standard of our social, commercial and private life. We may not realize it, but it is by the standard that we measure our daily living.

Did not Micah mean essentially the same thing? To do justly is to measure the daily moral life by the standard of our moral ideals. It is simple, natural, no one can dissent from that. Everyone believes it.

Life would be cold and mechanical if it consisted only in doing justly. The warmth and color, and variation and beauty of our life is in the fact that we do love kindness. Just as the sun coming up above the eastern horizon in the morning dispels the cold and darkness, bringing out the beauty of the world, and shining upon it at full noon day quickens all its life, and passing into the west in the evening leaves behind a world of glory and splendor, so this love of kindness coming into our early childhood dispels the darkness of duty, brings out into prominence the beauties of our character, enriches and enlivens our noonday of life, and passing on into the night of death leaves the monuments our deeds behind enveloped in a world of glory and splendor.

It is this love of kindness that tempers the cold hard realities of life in terms of its noblest ideas. A young boy finds that his pleasure in life is very greatly increased by doing some little thing to bring a smile of appreciation from his mother. That is small, but it is the rising of the sun of kindness, and it makes the hard duties

stand out in a new light. He does cheerfully and willingly things that before would have been impossible. Just this simple beginning becomes the impetus into an ever-widening circle of people for whom he loves to do a kindness, not for the sake of the appreciation, but for the sake of the persons. So it becomes the ruling passion, his power in duties, inspiration in struggle, his courage in danger, carrying him through hardships of life, and filling his old age with glory and splendor.

To love kindness is the simple natural touch of the divine in each human soul. Even the meanest of God's children show that to them also it is given to love kindness. Somewhere somehow the soul of the most degraded expands at times into nobility and beauty under the warming light of this divine heritage. It is as simple and natural as the shining of the sun, to love kindness is [an] endowment of all. There is no mystery about it.

Finally, the old prophet exhorted us to walk humbly with our God. This is the truth that supplements all, that reaches down deep into our souls and lifts us and transfigures us in glory. The surface of our lives may be filled with doubt and perplexity, hardship and pain, we may have periods when it seems as if we absolutely ignore the existence of God, but down deep in the steady undisturbed undercurrent of our life there is the deep conviction that in and through all there is the guiding hand of an intelligent loving God. Just as in our own life with its defeats and its victories its joys and its pains, with its evidences of weakness and strength, we are conscious that there is a deep undercurrent which seeks its realization in a higher and better life, so in the world with all its misery and suffering, with all its pleasures and happiness, with its periods of apparent decay, and inactivity, we are ever certain that there is a deep far-seeing power guiding it towards a better and nobler life for men. However few we may go astray in our doubts, we come back in the end to the simple conviction that in and through all, all the marvels and wonders of nature, in and through all the intricate workings of the human soul there is ever present the power of the all-powerful God. Deep beneath all the turmoil of life is the guiding hand of a loving other.

That is the eternal truth that is common to us all, and the truth that moulds our life into a life of simple devout worship in all our thoughts and in all our deeds.

To do justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God is the simple religion that transforms the sciences of living into the art of life, that unites all the souls of men into one common fellowship with each other and with God, and with our lives to God's eternity. Shall we not live the simple religious life, sincerely and honestly?