

The Renewal of the Spirit

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No Date¹

Scripture: Matthew 18:21.

Text: Matthew 15:7², "This people ... honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me."

It is not too extravagant a statement to say that the idea back of these words of the text suggests one of the pressing problems of the habits of living today. The assertion so often made that the people of today are lacking in religious faith, and that the tendency of the generation which is now growing into manhood and womanhood is away from the religious habits of life has a certain basis of truth. Jesus seems to have regarded the people of his time as lacking in that real consciousness of cooperative work with God so essential to all true living. He saw that in their religious habits there was no spiritual power. Is not the same {??} with us today?

A few years ago a scientist thought that he had solved the problem of perpetual motion, as many a man has thought before. His plan was to connect an electric dynamo with an electric motor. The dynamo would generate the electricity which would make the motor go, and the motor in its turn would keep the dynamo in motion as it generated the electricity. All that would be needed, he thought, would be to get the thing once in motion and the interaction of the

¹ The notes on this sermon give no exact date. The location, "No. Andover" is clear. But the sermon certainly is from the period when Earl Davis was a student at Harvard Divinity School. Among other things the paper matches the paper from other dated sermons from this period of time. In addition, a few sermons from this period were edited with a blue pencil—as this one was edited. There is a note at the top of the first page, "(7) Sermons I," which suggests that this may have been part of a school exercise.

² The manuscript clearly has "Text: Matthew 15:7," but the text that follows is from Matthew 15:8.

machines, the one upon the other, would keep them in motion forever. The inventor, highly elated with his plan set the machines in their proper positions, and having first set the dynamo to running at its full capacity, connected it with the motor. Still more elated was he when he found that his theory was working out as he had hoped. Day after day the dynamo kept the motor in motion and the motor supplied power for the dynamo. But after a few days his {???) was somewhat checked as he noticed that the power which was passing from one machine to the other was gradually becoming less and less; there was a constant waste of power. After the machine had been running about 40 days it stopped. All the energy was gone, and the two lifeless machines stood patiently waiting for a new supply of power. The inventor had failed to take into account the daily loss of power by friction.

The same kind of self-perpetuating schemes have been tried in all ages as methods of daily living and satisfying the deep needs of a human soul. One may cite as an illustration those English people, of whom George Eliot is perhaps the best known, who attempted to reduce all religion to the simple habit of worshipping humanity. Geo. Eliot's novels were written to give expression to these ideas. They held that man receives all his help, all his inspiration, all his courage from his fellow men. Men unconsciously worship each other, and the best of man is the greatest of truth. Let me quote two passages from Geo. Eliot, as suggesting these thoughts

How exquisite is the satisfaction of feeling that another mind than your own sees precisely where and what is the difficulty, and can exactly appreciate the success with which it is overcome.³

An Emerson or a Theodore Parker, or a Channing would have said that the appreciative mind was responding so fully to the other because it was filled with the Divine Spirit. Again she says:

³ This is from an April 1849 letter from George Eliot to Sara Hennell.

It is always good to know if only in passing a charming human being; it refreshes one like the flames and woods and clean brooks.⁴

Another would say the same thing but add, "it is the spirit of God speaking through that charming person. To them the highest source of power was in man. The fact is they were trying to set up a perpetual motion machine, one man receiving inspiration in worshipping another, and the second in turn receiving his energy from the first. This plan worked for a time, but day-by-day the original endowment of spiritual power grew less and less, as the friction of daily life drew upon it, until at last the force was all expended, and the great invention of a new religion ceased to meet the demands of the soul.

We are now suffering from a plan which is very similar to the one that Geo. Eliot believed in. We have attempted to make a perpetual motion machine by linking together in a closed system religious feeling with religious service. "Do good, and you will be good," "Be good and you will do good," are expressions which we have used to express this simple way of interpreting the religious life. So we have devoted ourselves to all forms of doing good. Private charity, public philanthropy, social service, all these have become commonplace in the lives of most people. Many people unwilling to face the battles which modern thought has forced upon them in solving religious problems have retreated behind this alluring machine of perpetual motion. "Do good and you will be good," and have insisted upon the thought that it makes no difference what you believe so long as you do good. They have been taken at their word, the service has been performed, and for a time the soul has been satisfied in the service. But slowly the spiritual power has been used up and now there [sic] some people are complaining because the lives of the men of today lack the spiritual impetus which seems to have been present years ago. Slowly the perpetual motion machine of "Do good and you will be good" has run itself dry of its original spiritual power and the bare mechanism is left. The habit of doing good has become fixed, but its spiritual power,

⁴ Ilfracombe Recollections, May-June 1856. In *George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals*, edited by J.W. Cross, 1885.

which alone gives it significance is lacking. Giving money, founding and endowing institutions, helping less fortunate people has become a habit, almost the fashion. True indeed it is that the habit is good, but the danger is that the habit may become a mechanical automatic process utterly void of spiritual worth. We may honor people with our deed but our heart may be far from them. We may honor God in our habits, we may feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit the suffering, we may sing our praises and offer our prayers, and yet it may all be done without that spiritual significance which alone elevates man to the heights of the Divine, and still our hearts may be far from Him. Sir Launfal, proud and arrogant cast gold at the beggar and found not the Holy Grail. Sir Launfal, humble and loving, shared his crust, and gave a drink of water, and found the Holy Grail.

That always has been, and is now the one great problem of life. To retain our daily habits of having good, and doing good and being good, and at the same time to keep our lives from becoming mechanical and unspiritual. I can imagine how deep was the feeling of satisfaction, how sincere and honest was the prayer of the Pilgrims, when in freedom they worshipped God together for the first time here in New England. Yet they soon lost the spirit of freedom, in the habits which freedom established. A long fierce struggle for their descendants became necessary to put new life into those dead habits. Even now does our inmost soul respond with thankfulness as we enjoy the privileges of religious freedom, that freedom which the Puritans and the Pilgrims so quickly lost. Do we realize what a relief it must have been to many souls to think that they no longer felt the necessity of believing those hideous ideas of New England Calvinism? May it not be that we are again becoming mechanical in our attitude towards the richness of liberal thought? The habit of being liberal has grown upon us, and the liberal spirit is in danger of losing its zest and power. That we would be willing to make the same sacrifices, to undergo the same social ostracism, to fight the same stern battles for religion's sake that those of the {???-founding-???} generation responded to in answer to the spirit of God speaking in their souls is by no means certain.

I often wonder too if we go to the polls and vote with as much satisfaction and honest self-respect as did those men who first took part in electing the officers to conduct the affairs of the new self-governing nation of the United States. The habit of self-government has become so common with us that we fail to appreciate its significance and we perform our duties without realizing the responsibilities which rest upon us. Must we not admit that the honor which we pay to the ceaseless work of men whose habits of life have glowed to a white heat with the great spiritual power received from the Father is an honor of the lips, and that our hearts are far from them. Like the great singing sphinx of Egypt, we respond to the first rays of the rising sun, and give forth our music of praise in the early morning. But as the day advances, and we become used to the new power, our music ceases, and we fall into the commonplace again, even as the sphinx loses its music as the sun rises higher and higher, until finally it becomes as dumb as the sands of the desert.

I said that people are complaining because the world seems to them to be becoming irreligious. That is true to the extent that our old religious habits are losing their vitality and are becoming mere mechanical operations. We need to revive the spiritual power, to have a clearer consciousness of the spirit of God speaking to us with the voice of command in those still quiet hours of clear thought and deep emotion. We need to put ourselves into right relation with God and his great underlying purposes of the world's work. We need to feel that every duty is sacred, and that every work should be done with honor and dignity. We need to feel the Real Presence of the Divine power working in us and through us and about us, and our deep and eternal dependence upon him. This and this alone can keep the habits of daily life glowing with the heat of spiritual power. There are two ways by which we may come to the consciousness of God's power working in and through us, and of the necessity of the spiritual in the world.

On the one hand we may let the gradual process of losing our spiritual vitality go on unchecked until finally by some great catastrophe we are recalled to the necessity of our communion with God. How often it is in the life of nations, evils go unchecked until at the last the cold

mechanical habits of living are no longer to be endured by men with Divine natures. Then comes the spirit of Revolution and upheaval. New life is infused into the old habits, new habits are formed to give expression to new truth, and again the balance between daily habits and spiritual demands is adjusted. Many a life is lived through years of cold mechanical response to habits, then some sorrow, some unexpected suffering, some great demand reveals the fact that the spiritual power, which alone can carry one through such a crisis is wanting. Discouraged, heart-broken, the injured soul tried to rekindle the fires of the spirit, tries anew to come into communion with the source of all help and comfort. This also is Revolution. Terrible and bitter are its methods. It is like a flash of lightning suddenly darting across the dead heavy lifeless space between the earth and a cloud. The communication between the earth and the cloud has become poor by unusual conditions. The positive electricity must flow to the negative. At last the stored energy of these two forces, which ought to flow, the one into the other, as two drops of water become one, becomes so great, the tension is so high that the space which keeps them apart is spanned and the normal conditions are brought about by this great {??} working process of Revolution.

On the other hand there is the simple natural process of constant communication with the great source of all power. Men ought to work together with God. There is the still small voice which speaks to us in moments when we rise above the commonplace, and think noble thoughts, and have noble feelings and are prompted to do noble deeds, moments when "There are hopes the bloom of whose beauty would be spoiled by the trammels of desecration."⁵ Hours which we spend together in quiet worship, conscious that our souls are united by one common high purpose, by one noble aspiration, are hours when the Spirit is directing us, and we are being charged with that spiritual power which alone has done great deeds. In the home, in the fields, in houses of worship, wherever we are, if we will put aside the things that bind our spirits and in freedom look up to the Source of our power, we shall receive the uplift, the

⁵ Quotation is from Ellen Pickering, *The Merchant's Daughter*, 1836.

inspiration, the courage which we need, the vitality which we can make the daily habits of life burn with love and devotion to what is right.

The low rumblings of our political and industrial world, the great period of religious doubt and distrust, the all too common wasted life, and defeated soul, the days of discouragement and idleness in our own lives, all these are warnings to us that there is not a complete adjustment between the daily habits and the spiritual power. The machine needs new energy. Shall we let the warnings go unheeded, and await some great catastrophe to spin into action, and make us feel our dependence upon God, or shall we respond to the quiet simple commands of God as he speaks to us in our moments of communion with Him. Shall we let the habits of citizenship become so lifeless that awakened by some great disturbance, we find the spirit gone? Shall we let the responsibilities of our liberal religion be shirked until one day we find that the old vigor has ceased to exist and we are overcome by a stupor of religious indifference? Shall we permit our opportunities in this life for growth and power to run to waste? God forbid! On all sides the demands for new life, for a greater spiritual power are calling us to respond [to] the quiet commands of God heard within our souls. To that call we will respond, realizing that only by working with God can our greatest good and God's own purposes be attained.