

## Man's Responsibility

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Pittsfield, MA\*

Scripture: Job 28:1-27; Galatians 6: 1-10

Text: Galatians 6:5, "For every man shall bear his own burden"

Such a bold and apparently cold-blooded statement of a fact of life which most everyone is painfully aware of from his own experience. Seems almost unnecessary, and at first thought seems rather inconsistent as a teaching of a gospel in which one of the choicest statements is, "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."<sup>1</sup> How many times in the course of the year we become discouraged, tired and weary and long for one moment of relaxation, one moment in which to throw aside the responsibility, and feel the relief which might come to us in knowing that there is nothing at that moment that we must do. We stand at the dock watching the unloading of a big ocean steamship, and we wonder how that great ship must feel, if she has power of feeling, to find herself safely in dock, protected from the winds and storms, and free from the burdens of freight which she has been carrying. I fancy we would say that she must have a feeling of satisfaction and joy to know that she is free from responsibility and care, and safe from all dangers. What a delight, too, it would be for her to slip out of the harbor, and free from all burden, to dance merrily over the surface of the water unrestrained by the cases of a cargo.

Such a picture is alluring and attractive, and it may seem that it is just the kind of a picture that a gospel of peace and joy might bring. We call our gospel of the liberal religion a gospel of peace and joy, and we may think that it paints for us a picture such as I have described, carefree and irresponsible. But far from being true is that idea. However much we may feel

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\* According to the notes on this text, this sermon was also given in Canton, MA (December 4, 1904), Billerica, MA (no date given) and Sterling, MA (January 22, 1905).

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11:28

that a gospel of peace and joy cannot bring with it this message, "Each man shall bear his own burden," it will appear upon second thought that the fundamental message of liberal religion is just this, that "Each man shall bear his own burden" when the distinctions between the old conceptions of religion and the modern conceptions of religion have been stripped of all the attendant paraphernalia, and we lay open to our view the very essence of the distinction we shall find that this thought which Paul has so clearly put into these words, "Each man shall bear his own burden" is the foundation stone upon which liberal religion is constructed. It is because we believe that it is true that each man must bear his own burden, that we feel that the gospel of liberal religion has much more of real manliness and womanliness, and therefore much more of satisfaction and force than the old message where [the] cardinal principle seemed to have been to cast your burden upon someone else.

Now let us see how it will work out if we compare one or two of the old ideas with the corresponding modern ones for the purpose of discovering whether or not it is true that liberal religion in each case will say that "each man must bear his own burden" while the old thought will say, "Shift the burden to some other shoulders."

For example, take the question of Revelation. The old point of view says, "Oh, you need not disturb yourself about Revelation. God has provided for all that in advance. The Bible is a complete and perfect revelation of God's will, accurate, and infallible in every detail. The only thing that you have to do is to have faith, and then you will believe it all, the impossible as well as the possible. That blind belief in Revelation is the basis of your religious life."

Now I am not resurrecting these bygone ideas on the assumption that any man of sense today believes in them, although I have heard these very ideas preached from a pulpit in Massachusetts within a month. I simply speak of them to show the changed point of view. Modern religion would say on this point of Revelation something like this, "Yes, God has spoken in the Bible, at least in some parts of it. He has also spoken elsewhere. In the sacred books of all religions, we may find passages where the Divine spirit is evident. God has also revealed his truth in other ways than by the printed book. "That which inspires me is inspired,"

was the way Coleridge<sup>2</sup> determined what was Holy writing. It does not make any difference where we find scripture, in the Bible or not. If it is true and has the power of arousing the noblest aspiration in a human soul, it is Revelation from God." Now here it is evident that each man must determine very largely for himself what his Holy Scripture shall be. In other words, instead of having someone else tell you what Revelation is and in what book it is to be found, you have to find out for yourself. This is just the same as saying "Each man shall bear his own burden."

Or take an illustration of the distinction between the old and new in questions of moral conduct. Again, the old says that rules of conduct for every man are very explicitly set forth in the Bible. The only thing necessary is to follow that. On the other hand, modern thought says, "Just as there are certain passages of scripture which everyone accepts as inspired because they inspire everyone, so there are certain great principles which guide our conduct because everyone can see that they are by the very nature of things right. Everyone can see that the ten commandments are principles which must be observed in every community. But when it comes to decide the question of right and wrong in the thousand and one little details that make up the problems of daily life there is no fixed law or no fine scale or standard by which we can make an absolute decision. 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' is a very beautiful and far-reaching principle, but how can one know just what is for the best interests of his neighbor? 'Do unto others as ye would that they should do unto you' is a comparatively far-reaching answer in question of conduct, but how are you going to do unto others as you would that they should do unto you when you do not know what you would will to them to do unto you? In other words, modern thought says, 'You are endowed with a capacity of choosing between right and wrong, but it must rest with your own self to decide upon the particular action in a concrete case.'"

In other words, in the moral world as well as in the intellectual world, modern thought says the responsibility rests with the individual man. "Each man shall bear his own burden."

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). This quote is from his poem "Kubla Kahn."

True it is that Channing<sup>3</sup> stood for the dignity of Human nature and Emerson<sup>4</sup> for the Divineness of Human nature. But to accept these lofty standards of the nature of humanity, carries with it the obligation to accept the corresponding responsibilities. These corresponding responsibilities reduced to lowest terms are stated in the words, "Each man shall bear his own burden."

Now the meaning of this is quite evident. The spirit of God speaks to us, to each one of us directly, and not through an arbitrary mechanical system. Doubtless God did speak to man through the pages of the Bible, but that is not the only medium of Revelation from God to man. Every book, every sentence that has been the means of uplifting a human soul, that is a revelation of God. Every thought or ideal that frames itself in our mind, and impels us to noble conduct, that is the spirit of God revealing itself to us. Beyond all doubt the spirit of God was revealed to a wonderful degree in the life of Jesus. But it does not follow that in him we have the only revelation of the moral and spiritual ideals of God. Every man who has lived a life of love and devotion to what is right, has been a revelation of the moral and spiritual purposes of God.

Beyond doubt the church has been a great moral and spiritual force in the world's history. But it does not follow that the church is the only institution of moral and spiritual power.

Let me illustrate. We see about us every moment of our life evidences of a great force in the world which we call energy. Now one of the particular ways in which this energy is manifested is in electric lighting. It is evident that at some time man devised the first electric light, and that that first electric light would have a peculiar interest for us. But it does not follow that all the electric lights we use now can receive that power necessary to make them burn only through the medium of that machine which made the first light burn. No more are we confined to receiving spiritual Revelation through one particular book.

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<sup>3</sup> William Ellery Channing (1780-1842) foremost Unitarian preacher in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) important 19<sup>th</sup> century American writer; founder of Transcendentalism.

Or it may be that some particular machine can claim to be the most powerful generator of electricity. Let it be so, and we will give it our admiration and use its power if we are so situated that we can. But again, it does not follow that all electrical energy must be generated by that machine, and pour through its coils of wires. A smaller, very much less perfect [machine] will generate just as good electricity, and just as fine a quality.

All this goes to show that we can no longer hold to a conception of our relationship with God which will permit us to look to some agency outside our own person as a medium through which we are informed of God's will, and his moral purpose. The conception of a system by which the duty of discovering God's laws can be put upon the shoulder of some external agency, such as the Bible, the church, or Christ, is no longer tenable. But you and I are brought into direct communication with God's spirit, and each one must bear his own burden in this world process and accept the responsibility which the conception of being a co-worker with God places upon. As one of the direct agencies through which the spirit of God's working out a world process, each one shall bear his own burden. That is the one great message of modern thought.

As to the relation that this truth bears to our daily life, there are two ideas which are enlightening. Let us go back to the illustration with which we started and let us assume again that we are tired and weary and discouraged, and long for a moment of relaxation. Is it true that the picture of a ship safely in dock, and entirely free from the burden of cargo, is it true that such a picture is the one that we really want? On the contrary, I think that the picture that our souls must long for is the one of a ship laden to the very waterline, steaming energetically out of port to face the storms and winds of the great ocean beyond the harbor. It is such a picture that gives us courage, and recalls us to the duty of life, and responds to what is divine in us. Discouraged and weary with the weight of our cargo do we turn for inspiration to him who, without aim or burden floats listlessly over the sea of life, or do we turn to one whom we know is also carrying a heavy burden and is doing day-by-day the things that such a burden demand. It is the sympathy of like burdened vessels that helps, not that we expect to cast our burden upon him who is already burdened. But side-by-side with him to task and labor knowing that we are doing our

part in the world's work. Not to cast the burden upon another, but to know that "Every man shall bear his own burden" is the great truth, the great comfort of modern thought.

But we must remember that the electric machine, in order to do its work, in order to transform the energy of the universe into a form which will serve for making our light bulb glow with light, must come into communication with that all-pervasive energy. In our lives, too, if we are to use the mental powers which are given us and make valuable for mankind the knowledge that we have, we must let God's spirit have control of our lives. Giving up all conceit and vainglory, and sordid selfishness, we must become the medium through which God's spirit may bring wisdom and light, and love into the world. The duties which are our duties, the work, which is our work, the responsibility which is our responsibility are to us not a burden which we would cast upon the shoulders of another. But the burden which with a brave heart and a consciousness that we are working together with God, we shall carry as manfully and as womanly as becomes the dignity of one who is the spiritual son and co-worker of the Infinite power of the universe. Not the safely moored cargo-less ship, but the heavily laden vessel on the sea of life is the true and deep aspiration of our own soul to be. For we know that it is not a hardship, but a privilege for each one to feel that in doing the world's work, God's work, "Each man must bear his own burden."