

Sympathy

Earl Clement Davis

April 15, 1904

Harvard University Divinity Chapel

Cambridge, MA

Scripture

Text: Hebrews 13:3

"Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them;..."

We are associated by tradition by habits of thought, by habits of life with a way of living which is called Christianity. In all the diverse forms in which this way of life has found expression in writtne word and in noble life since the days when Jesus of Nazareth lived in Palestine, the real force and the real power has been in the spirit of it. Whether we read the story of Mark, who sees in Jesus the doer of great and noble deeds, or the story of Matthew who presents him to us as the promised messiah, or of John who sees in him the incarnation of the logos, we find there the glimpse of a great soul, the spirit of whose life so influenced itself upon the people of Palestine, that his life gave a new impulse to the religious world. We do not care much whether Jesus said this particular thing or that particular thing or not. But we do rejoice that Jesus lived his life with such devotion to the highest possibilities within himself and with such love for his fellow men, that they became infused with the spirit of his life, and by word and deed have transmitted to us the impression that he made upon them. The same spirit that was in Jesus has been trying to express itself in creed and in life all through the centuries of history, and is still working in the lives of men towards the realization of all that is good and noble.

So great have been the fruits of the spirit, so many noble lives have been lived, so many heroic deeds have been done, so many fine souls have made great sacrifices for what is true and noble, as men have tried to live their lives in the spirit in which Jesus lived his, that we have

come to believe that to live a life in that spirit is the highest and worthiest aim of a human being. As we meet in our daily life the noble types of men and women whose lives make the world a better and a finer place to live in, we see in them the same spirit that the people of Palestine saw in the life of Jesus so long ago, the same spirit that is found in every noble life. When we see a person whose life seems unsatisfactory and weak and selfish, we believe that if such a person could only be made to understand the spirit of a Christian life, that gloomy discouraging life would become rich and fruitful and lofty. In our efforts to be noble, and to help others in being noble, we try to infuse into their lives the spirit of Christianity, which has run like a stream of fine fresh water through the plain upon which have been enacted the living clamor of history. To this work of leading men into the Christian way of life, of helping men to understand its spirit and inspiring them to commit themselves to its principles many men of great power and nobility have devoted themselves. To this same work in one form or another we are devoting ourselves. From the results of limited observation, and rather meagre experience we believe that the world needs to realize and become vitalized by the spirit of Christianity. We are setting ourselves about this tremendous task of persuading men to live in the spirit of Christianity.

Now we are at work trying to persuade men to live their lives with the same kind of spirit with which we try to live ours. That is a delicate and a difficult result to attain. A man does not easily give up old habits and long established and perhaps dearly cherished ideas, simply for the sake of adopting the way of life which another points out to him. If we are to meet with any kind of results in influencing men's lives, we must study the condition of our work and try to find out what kind of men we are going to deal with.

Now I believe that the first thing that must [we] realize is that {???) we are dealing with individual human beings. As a matter of convenience we roughly group men into great classes. We speak of the rich and the poor, the educated + the uneducated, the criminals and the non-criminals. Politicians, educators, businessmen, laborers, ministers are convenient terms under which we group large numbers of

men who have a common interest. For purposes of writing and talking such classifications may serve a practical end, but when it comes to living, such distinctions disappear before the contrast of man with man. The man who thinks that humanity is made up of these various classes has yet to learn some of the very rudimentary facts of a real life. We may speak in our off hand way of the criminal class, and group therein all men who happen at the time to be under the ban of the law, but should we happen to become one of the number ourselves, I fancy that we would find them to be not so very much unlike other men. They have the same hopes of growth and development that other men have. The same great passions of life are present in them that we find in other people. The degrees of criminality both within and without the law are so diverse that we cannot draw the line. When it comes to real life in the living world, there is no such class of men as criminals. We may seek individuals, or perhaps groups of individuals who have over-stepped the boundaries of social and moral regulation, but we can know nothing of a criminal class for we do not live in classes, but as individuals who come in contact with each other in daily life. In the same general way we speak of the educated and the uneducated, but if we seek out the uneducated class, we shall find that it vanishes before our quest. We meet men whose education does not run along the same line of interests as ours, but they have collected their facts from experience and are able to use them to their own advantage. The farmer with his knowledge of the soil, and the plant life, and the stock of the {??} may not know much about the history of the ancient world, but he has the knowledge of his way of life. The laborer whose work seems so mechanical and apparently requires so little skill still has his education. Both he and the scholar may agree that his education is not broad, but to classify him among the uneducated, simply because his learning is not the same as ours, is a presumption which a few hours talk with such people will transform into a folly. There are degrees in the quality and the quantity of education, but the wholly uneducated man does not present himself.

No more can we group people into moral and immoral classes. Should you and I know the facts of the worst degraded being, and understand the causes that were a

factor in these sad results, I fancy that we might hesitate to class him among the wicked of the world, and then assert our right to a place away the respectable [sic]. We come in contact with men who are doing things that are wrong and selfish and cruel. The sins of the flesh are many but the sins of the intellect and the sins of the spirit are equally bad. The classifying of men according to good or bad is precarious business. As a matter of fact more of us are educated thoroughly, nor are we perfect in our lives. We are all climbing the mountain, some may be a little higher up than others, but none of us are at the top. In our journey, we meet with various human souls, some are educated, some are not, some are good, some are not, some are noble, some are not, but the final fact to remember is that while we are not entirely alike, yet our common points are greater than our individualistic peculiarities. In the everyday life we meet as man to man, as soul to soul, and the artificial barrier of our talk and book life are obliterated by facts. If you and I are to lead men into the Christian way of life, we must meet men, not as a minister meeting a layman, not as an educated man instructing the uneducated, not as a good man seeking to convert the bad, but as man meets man, realizing the common ground upon which we stand, and the common ends which we are seeking to attain. Whatever else a man is, his is a human soul with divine possibilities and will not stand patronizing.

But in addition to meeting these people as man and man, if we are really going to lead them, we must understand the inner workings of their natures. Humanity is like [a] great forest. If we looked down upon it from the top of a distant hill, it presents itself to us in its great grandeur relieved by the varying shades and tints of the leaves which are exposed to the view of the outside observer. But if we enter the forest and move about among the individual trees which go to make up the picture which we had seen from the hilltop, we find great charm, greater variety of beauty, more exquisite bits of scenery from within than we had ever imagined. To know and understand the real charm of a human being we must get beneath the surface, and see into the inner workings of the soul, and ferret out the complexity of causes and desires which makes up the forces that nourish the learner. Balzac's village Doctor could see the strong glowing efforts of a divine soul even in the

simplest of the men to whom he gave his life. The keen insight of Victor Hugo could analyze the inner life of Jean Valjean whose conduct lead [sic] him to the life of a galley slave. But his life, when we come to know it is transformed into great beauty and strength. It takes Hugo's insight to reveal the inner life of a Fontine, who in the midst of all the sadness and cruelty of her misery and shame still commands our pity and respect. Through the power of Hawthorne, the Scarlet Letter of Hester Prynne is transformed into the image of the noble struggle of an injured soul reaching out through her misery after the peace of divine life. In our efforts to help such souls, we must see into their lives, understand the conflicts of desires and passions, of hopes and ambition. We must find the strong places and build upon them as foundations, we must seek the weak places and strive to strengthen and mend them. The unfortunate victim of dissipation may become a strong powerful man through the influence of a little strengthening power from a friend. For, after all, he is not wholly bad for the very qualities which make him a {??} companion of his life, are also the same qualities that bind men together in their common labor for the good life. It needs but a change of emphasis to make him a good noble man. The much abused politician often needs but a slight amount of the right kind of influence applied in the right way to transform him into the good citizen. The physician, when he is called to treat a person who is ill, very carefully studies the particular case in hand, and discovers where the weakness is, tries to trace it to its cause, then when he has learned all that can be learned, he gives a medicine which will remove the cause of the disease, will check the progress of it, and give the natural forces of the body opportunity to build up the affected parts. Our work must be done with even greater care and precision. Each case that comes to us must be studied and traced back to the causes of the evil, then the cause must be removed, and upon the foundation of the unaffected {??}, the process of repair and rebuilding must be carried on. As the success of the doctor's work depends largely upon his ability to diagnose his cases, so will the success of our work depend very largely upon our ability to understand the in[ner] workings of the man to appreciate his point of view in life.

But to be able to lead the men whom we meet, even though we do understand them, to be able to give them the impulse to the Christian way of life, we must be the living embodiments of the spirit that was in Jesus. Water cannot rise higher than its source, neither can the influence of our words and our deeds rise above their source. The {??} negative type of goodness which sets itself up as an example of abstinence, and propriety is a poor apology for the strong positive, definite spirit of Jesus' life. It is not the beautiful protected inland lake that furnishes the great power, but the great strong flowing river, which has gathered together into one river the little streams of water from the hills. In the work to which we are devoting ourselves, we must take up into our lives the spiritual truths that flow from the mountains of history, and from the hills of living persons, and with this great river of truth which has become {??} because we have taken it up into our very innermost lives, and {??} it with our own personality, we are equipped to lead men into the spirit of the Christian way of life. The roaring torrent which we hear over on the other side of the mountain does not go to swell the power and volume of our stream of influence. The truth which we have heard of but have not found and tested by the experience of our own lives, or the sympathetic observation of another life, does not become a part of our stream of influence, and the less we have to do with it the better we are off. The final value which our words and our life will have will be determined by the dynamic of the spirit with which we live it. It was the spirit of Jesus' life that enabled him to help the men among whom he lived, it will be the spirit of our lives that will be the source of whatever power we may have in helping men to live the Christian life.