

That Man May Live

Earl C. Davis

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I tried to point out that the true spirit of this festival time is not to be found in heaping adoration upon the great man of ages ago, not in pouring precious ointment upon the dead past, but in turning the power of our goodwill upon the living present, and the common ordinary human life, of which we sometimes speak with a sneer and a curl of the lip. Too long, already far too long, have we built the sepulcher of the prophets, and garnished the tombs of the righteous. The prayer uttered for the sake of the Christ long since dead, the work done for the honor and the glory of the Christ whose memory we recall this morning, becomes a hollow mockery. Without detracting one iota from the honor and the respect with which I look upon Jesus of Nazareth, indeed adding to the true honor and respect in which he may be held, I say deliberately that the most appalling, the most sickening, the most discouraging aspect of the whole religious world today is the fact that the real, noble human personality, the moral vigor of his life and purpose is being buried fathoms deep by sentimental mush and platitudes. I fancy that if it could happen that he should come among men today and listen to all this heathen worship that is being paid to him, he would end it all with a curt, "Oh stop your nonsense and go about my Father's business." Let the dead past bury its dead, and let us attend to the living.

There may have been great souls in the past. All honor to them, and all praise to them for their illimitable toil through which we now enjoy the heritage of their lives, but our work, our interest, our duty is in the living present, among those souls that are today trying to give expression to the great values of human life, and trying to make a world of soulful goodness. The adoration and worship of the great man was a part of the habit of mind of the past. As we are leaving behind us the old ideas according to which the whole nation worked for, and adored in form at least,

the one great ruler, we must leave behind us also the notions of that same time. We look for our goodness in the world, for the witnesses to our belief in humanity, not in the revelation of the great man of years ago, but in the men and women of common life, whose everyday devotion to what is right and just reaches us where we live. I want to quote to you a passage from Prof. Foster's book, a passage in which the whole question we are here discussing is touched upon with a clearness and a pungency that I could not reach. He is discussing the question of the relation of the Great Man, especially Jesus, to everyday religious life. The question is as to whether the Great Man shall be as controlling in the future as he has been in the past. He says,

Aristocracies of the old kind are passing away; feudal aristocracies, aristocracies of birth, capitalistic aristocracies. A new aristocracy is arising, the aristocracy of democracy, knights of labor. The emphasis is upon the people. The creator seems to have thought that one Niagara was enough for a continent, but he has made thousands of little streams to flow by our homes and through our fields, and the glory and the greatness of our country is due not so much to Niagara as to these little streams which gladden and refresh the earth. Not denying the kindling power of the Great Man of the past, are we not showing wisdom in finding inspiration and rebuke in the cheerful godliness, the fidelity to duty, the heroic uncomplaining self-sacrifice, the unselfish love and service manifested by plain men and women in the common lot all around us today—by the washerwoman supporting her family of little children, the unfortunate merchant who sacrifices every comfort and pleasure that he may quietly pay his honest debts, the young man who gives up college that he may earn the money for his sister's education, the old people toiling in the dark at the mountain's foot to keep the boy in school so that, as they say, he may have a better chance in life than they have had. Ah, my friends, human nature's soil did not exhaust itself in growing one bright consummate flower; the earth is bursting with new bloom every day.

"But the beautiful life which is lived by the 'common herd' today, has not that life come from the life of Jesus?" you ask. That is just the point. Has it? What is the fact? Is human goodness aristocratic, nay monarchic, or is it democratic? All prejudices and fears aside, it is evident that human nature's creative power in the world of goodness is not limited to the Great Man and the Great Man's influence, but, though graded, is immanent and constant in the race; it is evident, therefore, that the democratic goodness about us is not so much a donation from Jesus as a creation of modern men, who are as certainly children of God as Jesus was himself—if so be, as Paul said, God is One.<sup>1</sup>

I am not presenting the quotation for the purpose of freeing you from the habit of Christ worship, for I am sure that you are already free from that form of polytheism, but I am presenting it to bring out the point that the values of life must be such values as shall be seen and recognized among those who are living today. Our task is not to build sepulcher for the prophets of yesterday, be they one or many, or to garnish the tombs of the righteous of yesterday, be they ever so pure and noble. Rather is our task among the men and women of the living present, striving to know the values of human life, and to bear witness to the truth of those values, in their heroic work for the morrow. Oh, do you not see that amid all the imperfections and the cruelties of the times in which we are living, amid all the dirt and the shame, human nature's creative power in the world of goodness is molding and fashioning human souls that are as clear and as true and as honest as ever breathed the breath of life. The glory of life is not behind us. It is before us. Already I see the democratic spirit becoming powerful, more sympathetic, more richly endowed with the power of understanding. Already, I see that men are beginning to realize that life is not to be measured by what has been but by what shall be. There is growing up in our midst a great human appreciation of the

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<sup>1</sup> This passage is from George Burman Foster's (1858-1918) book, *The Function of Religion in Man's Struggle for Existence*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1909, pp. 235-6.

human worth of human life. There is developing an irrepressible force which declares that the great values of life which we have heretofore enjoyed vicariously by worshipping and adoring some great man like Christ, shall be enjoyed by men and women in spirit and in truth. The truth for which their souls hunger they shall have. The chance to think, to hope, to aspire, to know the truth that the truth may make them free, the chance to lie down and rest and dream, and take time to live, the chance to work a real work, the chance to be free and think over after him the thoughts of that power whose laws rule the sun by day and the stars by night, that chance shall men have, common men, and common women, among whom we live today. The builders of old, rejected the stone of the common people from the temple of their religious aristocracy, but today when we are building the temple of democracy, the stone which the builders rejected, the same is being made the head of the corner. More than that. We the very people, once rejected, are ourselves building the human temple wherein is enshrined the infinite possibilities of human life.

And what is that life that you would live? What is that life that you would have your fathers and mothers, your brothers and sisters, your sons and daughters live? What would you have the world be, and what kind of men and women would you like to live among, if you had the free choice? Would you care to have your sons and daughters grow into men and women of low sensuality, would you care to have them become drudges laboring day and night for their bread and butter while all hope and all desire for the things that men deem to be worthwhile is crushed out of them? Would [you] care to live yourself amid the dirt and filth of some sections of our large cities? Would you care to have your children playing, and living in the midst of crime, vice, shame, and degradation? Is that the kind of a world that you want? Are the men and women whom you admire, the men and women who you would have for your friends, the kind that grow up amid these conditions? Do you like the criminal, do you like the dissolute, do you enjoy thinking that on this day, the day of the festival of goodwill among men, there are thousands upon thousands of human beings, once pure innocent babes, who are now outcasts, soiled, degraded, without hope or outlook in life, scarcely rising

to the height of a pure thought, never able to lift their heads above the filthy slime of poverty, misery, and shame? Do you mean to tell me that such are the people you like to see living on this beautiful earth? Do you mean to tell me that such are the people you would like to see humanity produce, if you had anything to say about it, if the turn of your hand, or the word of your mouth had the power to say yes or no? I hardly need to ask you the question. I know that these very deplorable facts of life rest as heavy on your mind as they do on mine, or on the mind of anyone else.

I know the kind of men and woman you like. I know the kind of women you would like to have your daughters become. I know the kind of men that you would like to see your sons develop into. You are human, and has not humanity all through the ages told the tale of its ideals and its aspirations? Who are the men and the women, who are the heroes and the heroines of poetry, and drama, and fiction? Who are the men and who are the women that in the long evolution of history, the human race has chosen as the choicest products of the soil [of] human life? Why have we built sepulcher of the prophets and garnished the tombs of the righteous? Why does the crowd break into cheers, strong and hearty, when it sees the evidence of noble manhood, of fearless bravery, of disinterested integrity? Why does your heart thrill in the presence of that which speaks of the highest manhood, and the highest womanhood? Why do you feel cast down in the presence of degradation and shame? Why are you indignant in the presence of shameful wrong? Why does the crowd hiss and condemn brutality, ignominy and wrong? You know as well as I. And your inner feelings bear witness to its truth. In the long process of evolution we have come to distinguish values in life. Through toil and labor, we have learned to know some of the values of life that are worthwhile. Just as we like the beautiful flower, the inspiring landscape, the noble tree; just as we shrink instinctively from the ugly and the repulsive in nature; so in human life we respond to that which is beautiful, to that which is strong, to that which is fit, and we shrink from that which is perverse, from that which is repulsive. Because that is our very nature. The power of selection in humanity has selected from all the variations of human history those men and those women who bear witness to the

truth, to justice, to honor and to beauty, because they are the things adapted to survive in the environment of the human mind. Simply because we are human, we cherish the memory of these noble men and women, as the choice products of the soil of humanity. In spite of all that we may say, in spite of all that we may do to the contrary, I know the kind of manhood and womanhood that we admire and honor. I know what our real secrets and our real ideals are. I know the kind of humanity we would make if we had the free power to make and to choose. I know the kind of men and women that we would want our children, and our brothers and sisters to be. I know the ends and the aims towards which we work. They are human, and just because they are human, they are good and noble and true. They are commandments not written upon tablets of stone, but stamped into every fiber of our being.

But why, then, all these horrible witnesses of shame, ignominy, and degradation, if these lovely sentiments are true? Do your sentiments not stand condemned by the very brutality of the facts about us? You say to me, that if you had the power to make this old world bloom like the garden of paradise, you would, but facts and conditions are against us. And I say to you, that you have the power. In your hands and in your mind rests the power of realizing those ideals and dreams of truth and justice and goodness that shape themselves before our eyes in the silence of the nighttime when we set our fancies free. There is an old doctrine of the Christian Theology which developed partly from legend, and partly from meditative philosophy. As interpreted by dogmatic theology, it has little inspiration in it, but in its deeper meaning, it has a profound truth. I am speaking of the doctrine of the Incarnation. It is essentially a doctrine of the Christmas festival, to the effect that in the birth of Christ the spirit of God with all his power, and all his wisdom, was incarnated in human flesh. Take that idea, democratize and socialize it and see what it means. It means that these values of human life which we prize, are not fitful dreams of a diseased imagination, but that they are the true fruit of humanity, such as should, and indeed must, arise in the experiences of human nature in such a universe as we live in. They are of the very essence and nature of the universe of which we are a part. We live in a universe, whose laws, whose powers

and forces, produce in us such dreams of justice, truth, and human life as we cherish. More than that, those very laws, those very forces, those very powers live in us, and produce in us those very longings and dreams of manhood and womanhood and human life, produce in us the finite yearnings after the infinite truth, and goodness and justice. Sometimes, when we let our fancy free, we feel ourselves caught up as a grain of sand, and borne in the grip of these powers, towards some great purpose of human life. These very values that we cherish belong to us, for the universe in which we live nourishes, and fosters them, and makes for them. What is more, we have the power to realize them. And in the work of realizing them, there is life, and peace, and goodwill among men. The irrepressible momentum of life makes for their truth and their reality.

Why, then, do these horrible facts still stare us in the face? First, because we have not yet learned to free ourselves from servile obedience to the Great Man. We cherish these ideals, and these values as belonging to the prophet, and the saint. We look upon them with awe and wonder and admiration, but we do not attempt to bridge the chasm which separates us from them. These values are not for such as we, is our feeling. Like the slave, admiring the prowess, freedom and independence of his lord and master, and longing that he might become like him, but never for one moment permitting the idea that he should become like him to enter his mind, do we still remain servile admirers. There still clings to us the false idea that in the presence of greatness, and goodness, it becomes us to be humble and servile, and stand afar off, not daring to approach. But those are the very things that we should attain, that we should live for. We have not yet applied the spirit of democracy to our standards of ethical life. We still build sepulcher for the prophets, and garnish the tombs of the righteous, while we should be stirred by the very power that moved the prophets, and be ruled by the very values that ruled the righteous. In the presence of these true values of human life, where we see the realization of what we would long to become, we stand like servile beggars, asking for alms, when we should stand erect, and strive for that which others have attained.

This very servility of ours, this very fear of ourselves which makes us cringe, and fawn in the presence of true human life and asks us to worship the good and the true in others, and call a Jesus of Nazareth our Lord and Master, is the subtle poison, that destroys the human personality, and drags it down to its lowest depths of degradation. Not daring to attain to that for which our whole being hungers, we are content to feed upon the crumbs and refuse that drop from the table of the righteous. Fearing to climb to the mountain tops of true ethical life, we grovel in the mire, of lesser things. Transitory pleasure we eat in place of true peace and happiness. Wealth of things we strive for, when we dare not enter the game for wealth of life. Power of the bodies of men we hunger for when we dare not appeal to their deeper truer natures. Social standing of the conventional sort we crave, when we dare not enter the ranks of the great true men and women, who today are working for the true values of humanity. It is this cringing fear which prevents us from striving for the true values of life, and compels us to seek less noble standards, and less noble aims, this is the force that makes beings of us servile not only to truth, but servile to all the lower viciousness of life, and that make us a part of the powerful system that produces, against their will, the victims of shame and degradation.

When we have accepted the lower standards, and have them the end and aim of life, when we have become seekers for things instead of for values, then we enter into that merciless conflict of selfishness and greed, that horrible warfare among men, which drives from their goodwill, and crushes out their nobility. Then we develop that harness and callousness, that enables us to crush the father of a family, the mother, the son and the daughter, if perchance they happen not to be ours, so that we may gain our low end. Having accepted the low standard, we resort to the low means and aims, and these together produce the low results.

The conditions of life today that sometimes make one feel that the very utterance of the phrase, "Peace on earth, goodwill among men," is a mockery, exist not because they must, but because you and I, and such as we are, either by direct thought, or by silent acquiescence, will that they shall exist. Are we really fearlessly, and courageously



working for the high standards of human life, that we cherish in others, and in the silence of the nighttime long for in ourselves, or have we compromised, and sidestepped, and because, forsooth, to compromise is the easier. Those, who are not for these high values of human life, clearly and uncompromisingly, are against time, and are taking part in the very fruits of modern life that repel us and cast us down. Are we living so that men and women must be crushed, and killed and degraded, directly or indirectly, in order that our low, servile aims may be realized, or are we living for the real values of human life, in which all are concerned only in this thing that man may live.