

## Choosing the Noble Life

Earl C. Davis

Pittsfield, MA

April 1, 1906<sup>1</sup>

Why should one choose the noble life? Is there any noble life? Is there any reason or sense in thinking that one kind of life is more to be desired than another? Why should you and I make any effort to be noble? Why should we not steal, if by so doing we can gain more of the things which bring us comfort, ease and luxury? Why should we not lie, and cheat in our conduct with men, if by so doing we can advance our own interests, and become the greater possessors of wealth and power? Why should we refrain from injuring another person if the suffering of another would in any way enhance our own comfort, and well-being? Is there any sense in our standards of nobility and goodness, standards which demand of us certain exactments as to conduct?

But to go one step more. Do we as a matter of fact live a noble life? Or are we merely conventionally good, doing those few things which seem expedient to us in our efforts to maintain a certain relationship with our fellow men? Is our conduct guided by anything more than a selfish animal desire to get and beget at the least possible outlay of labor, and expense, and hoping for the greatest possible return? Do we maintain our standards of conventionality according to the law of supply and demand, and never regard the question of real virtuous worth at all, or is there really some sound moral sense of nobility and goodness within us that is the organizing unit of our lives? I do not ask whether our lives are perfectly noble, or entirely

---

<sup>1</sup> Nine sermon manuscripts were collected together in a string-bound package, this one among them. This manuscript was distinctive in that it was in an envelope with a precise date, April 1, 1906. This date, along with the similarities in paper and the fact that all were hand-written, is the basis on which I have dated all of the manuscripts in this string-bound package to 1906.

virtuous and without blemish, but I simply ask whether there is any evidence at all of nobility, of sound moral worth in our nature such as would elevate us above the low plain of selfish greed, or conventional norms, and enable us to choose a noble life, and order our conduct in accord with the standard of nobility.

Of course I can see very easily that there are certain group conventionalities which give the appearance of moral worth. I see among people of a church a certain tendency to help and assist each other, to recognize the worth and value of each other's person for his own sake, but I observe also that this appearance of virtue and brotherly love is, in general, conventional rather than moral. Outside of the pole of the few, each one seems free to refuse to help, to positively inspire another, if by so doing he gains one iota of power or wealth. We find that same group-honor and kindness among thieves. One thief will hardly rob another, although they count it high honor to successfully rob a stranger. One is reminded of the chivalrous days of the highway man, who robbed the rich and gave alms to the poor, as he views the conduct of many of the pirates of modern industry. Among these robbers there is a certain honor, which forbids them to touch or injure the person of the croft, but when they are outside of the croft all is fair, and the spoils of the contest pass into the hands of the victor, while the one who has been defeated by a hair's breadth is left to die of hunger and thirst.

Indeed it is very easy to paint the picture of our life in very dark colors, and very deep shadows. I might indeed show you that every man has his price, and will sell his soul for a mess of pottage or even for a less price than that. I might, as the pessimist does, lead you into the dark and gloomy corners of society and present for your inspection the greed and the selfishness and the hypocrisy of men, until you would cry with the most bitter pessimist, "all is wrong, all is black, all is foul, except you and I." You would then suspect me, and I should suspect you. Out of all the wonderful world about us, the only person above suspicion is our own selves.

I say I might present you with this gloomy picture, and leave you beneath the cloud of suspicion thus created, but I am not going to do so because it would be false, because it would be only the faint outline of the world as recorded on an underexposed sensitive plate. Go to that very pessimist and begin to search him, and diagnose his troubles. You will find that he believes that he himself sees with a true eye, and regards himself as living a noble life of unquestioned honesty. If you press him with inquiries about his nearest friends you will find that he regards them as about as honest as himself. They may have a few little faults that cast a shadow enough over them to make them of interest, but they are, after all is said and done, men of very fine quality and integrity. He believes in them because he knows them. The people whom he knows only by hearsay, those are the black and unregenerate and lost beyond redemption. Mr. A., of unquestioned integrity, knows Mr. B. very intimately. In the opinion of Mr. A., Mr. B. is an exceptionally fine man, in fact a remarkably good, noble person. No! Mr. A. does not know Mr. D. very well, but common report throws a suspicion over him. As for Mr. X. he is a most hopeless scoundrel. But Mr. B., of undoubted excellence, knows Mr. C., a very fine honorable man. Mr. C. knows Mr. D., regards Mr. D. as an unusually high type of manhood. Oh, yes. Mr. D. knows Mr. X. Strange how people should ever come to suspect Mr. X. Mr. D. has known him for years, and while he has not had all the advantages of life that many have had, he is at heart one of the finest and most whole-souled men that Mr. D. ever knew.

Thus it goes. Your pessimist is simply blinded by a fog, which prevents him from seeing clearly the people who are a short distance from him. Trace the outline of his black and gloomy world, from man-to-man, and you will find your way into the prisons, into the dark and hidden hovels of life, and even there you will find that there is a spark of nobility in the cloud, that the most degraded will at times become noble, and is not without his companion who will declare that in spite of the blackness of his life, he is at heart one of the finest men that ever lived. So when we get outside of the narrow confines of our provincialism, and really break down the high board fences of our back yard, and come to know the things that live in the alley,

we find that after all is said and done, the world is not so black as it is painted. The man who says that all is wrong, and that nature is depraved is either sick or ignorant. When the light of knowledge is turned on you find that the fog disappears.

That is why I am not going to paint the picture black, and blot out of our minds the things that make life rich and wholesome. We may call the chessboard of life black. We may call it white. Imperfect and uncompleted is this world we live in. Imperfect and in uncompleted are the people who live there. But even in the dark is the spark of nobility, and life itself speaks of greatness, hopes, experiences that lift us out of the gloom of pessimism, into the healthy vital atmosphere of activity. We are leaving behind the faith that rests upon false gods, and wild imaginations of a superstitious youth, and entering upon a faith in the reality of a world ordered by a great goodwill. Jesus of Nazareth looked upon the world of Palestine years ago and saw there the same kind of a nature that we see, a humanity, less perfect, more animal, more corrupt, more selfish, and inactive, and delinquent than we see today. He looked upon all this and saw there the evidence of an outward reality which corresponded to the inward ideal of his mind, and accepted a faith, and choose a noble life based upon this faith, that [the] lily of the field speaks to us, that the law of nobility speaks in us, and that the father and son work together for the attainment of an end ordered by the great unseen goodwill, whom he called "Father." We, today, are entering upon a like faith, resting upon these same great truths, that nature speaks to us, that freedom speaks in us, and the oversoul speaks through us.

In this faith we choose to live the noble life, rather than the ignoble, the unselfish life rather than the selfish, the pure life rather than the impure, not because we fear an eternal punishment, not because we are told by priest or church, not because it is expedient, not because it brings pleasure and comfort, but because our own nature, our own experience, our own inward being speaks to us of nobility. That consciousness of the greatness of man, that voice of duty, which has been the motive power of every noble life, that spark of the Divine within the dark which

gave the Spartan hero courage, and compelled the Spartan mother as she sent her son to war to come back with his shield or on it, that spark of nobility which has sent many a martyr to the stake, and many a hero to a noble death, that spark which, however fierce have been the floods of passion and brutality in all the ages, has always held its place in human life and has always been the power that has done the work of the world; that still speaks to us, still thrills us with the power of a great mission, still bids us [to] consecrate ourselves to a noble [life], even though it be at the cost of suffering. Never would man be man did he choose the good life out of fear for the results of the evil, or the commands of the gods. But man is man when he chooses the noble life because he feels within him the impelling command of the dignity, the nobility, the divinity of his own nature. Man is man when he chooses the noble life because he feels the force of the time-honored truth of "noblese oblige," when he feels that his nature is too noble to be ignoble, too great to be mean, too pure to be stained, too valuable to be dragged in the mire; when he feels that he is called to too great a work, to too grand a mission, to allow himself to master the precious moments in wasteful and degrading indulgences, when he feels himself too noble, too divine, too self-respecting to enjoy the satisfaction of his own desires to indulgence and luxury, when he knows that his own satisfaction is purchased by the suffering and degradation of another. In these days when the voice of the gods of childhood is dying, when the superstitious fear of punishment no longer serves as a whip to lash the cowering child into obedience and order, in these days when we are passing from the old restraints to the new ideals of work and accomplishment, we are called with the great voice of duty from within, and crying need from without, to choose the noble life. Not merely the conventionally good life, not merely the life that conforms to existing standards of morality and honesty and service, but the noble life which shall keep unsullied a noble being. In business, to choose the noble life that shall never permit us to deviate one hair's breadth from the conduct which belongs to a noble being. In labor, to choose the noble life which shall not permit us by act of omission or commission to fall one inch below the high standard of noblese oblige. In social relations, to choose the noble life, that shall not permit us to injure, or crush even the

least of our fellow men. Too long we have been living under the impression that man is a degraded, depraved human being, whose only hope was to escape, by some mechanism, a life of temporal degradation and eternal punishment. Let us leave that sad and gloomy nightmare behind us. The spark that enlivens the cloud is divine. In the image of the great goodwill are we fashioned, too noble to debase ourselves, too great to listen to the echoes of the bygone age. Before us are great and noble deeds to be done, pure and sweet lives to be lived, lives worthy of him who bears the image of Divinity in his very nature. Out of fear, out of superstitious obedience, I would never ask one to choose the noble life. But out of the greatness of our nature, with its infinite possibilities, we choose the good life. This is the great need of today. From every corner of the civilized world we hear the sounds of destruction of that house of a religion built upon the shifting sands of superstition. What turmoil and strife may attend its downfall we know not. But today when the sands are being washed away from the foundations, by the great flood of modern life, the call is for men and women who shall still stand upon the ancient foundation, where all the prophets of history have stood, where Jesus of Nazareth stood, where every great teacher has stood, and proclaim as of old, that truth which is the experience of every noble life. Micah expressed it in these words, "What doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."<sup>2</sup> Jesus expressed it in these words, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind and with all thy soul, and thy neighbor as thyself."<sup>3</sup> Emerson, because he believed that nature speaks to us, and freedom speaks in us, and the oversoul speaks through us, again uttered the same great truth, "Acquaint thyself at first hand with Deity."<sup>4</sup>

We, who can discover the laws of nature, we, who can feel the power and the thrill of fellowship with human beings, and penetrate the inner secrets of humanity, we, who can feel the mystic presence of the unseen, think you we are

---

<sup>2</sup> Micah 6:8.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 22:37-39.

<sup>4</sup> This quote is from the 1838 Harvard Divinity School Address by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882).

born to live a life of degrading self-indulgence and ease? Every noble impulse of your nature answers you, "No! a thousand times no." There wells up within you that strange mysterious power which bids you out of the very nobility of your being, choose the noble life, and work together with the unseen Goodwill for the realization of that new heaven and new earth, the dim and vague outlines of which are never entirely out of the range of our vision.