

Clear Thinking and Right Living in the Individual

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I wish to speak this morning on the subject, "Clear Thinking and Right Living in the Individual." I realize that this touches on a very complicated and difficult problem, yet it is one that touches very profoundly our everyday life, both as its outward influence and internal happiness. We often read the words, "By their fruits ye shall know them."² but do we understand the full meaning of them? At the very beginning let me point out a very common and very misleading error that crops up in our attempts to understand the meaning of this clear-cut saying. You have doubtless heard many people pass the remark that it does not make any difference what people believe or what they think so long as their conduct measures up to certain conventional standards. On the surface that is a very satisfactory principle by which to live, but if you stop to think it over it is one of the most vicious of all our present-day loose thinking immoralities. Jesus' rebuke for that kind of a slipshod attitude is stinging and profoundly true,

Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in thy name and by thy name cast out demons and by thy name do many mighty works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you, depart from me, Ye that work iniquity.³

That is a just rebuke for the person who has no opinions, and thinks to excuse himself by asserting that it does not make any difference what one thinks and what one believes, so long as conduct is satisfactory.

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908.

² Matthew 7:20.

³ Matthew 7:21-23.

But it does make a difference, it makes all the difference in the world. By their fruits we shall know them, but the quality and the nature of their fruits are determined by the quality and nature of their thinking, of their belief, their convictions, of their purpose, of the totality of their personality. We do not gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles. "Every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, and a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit."⁴ Let me illustrate the apparent truth of this. Two men may be working side by side in some public capacity. One is a genuine man, fully alive to the public interests, giving a clean disinterested public service without thought of his personal welfare except insofar as his growing integrity shall become the greater contribution to the public good. The other is a man who is to all apparent evidences equally a public spirited man, but who in reality is working for his own interests, and for his own advancement. These two men may work along together for many days or even many years, voting together, supporting each other's measures, and so far as the public may judge are equally good public servants. But in time the fatal day comes and these men come face to face with a measure that involves the issue of the public welfare against the selfish interest. Then comes the true test of the quality of the man, and the true nature of the inner man is disclosed to the public. The truly public spirited man accepts his own personal sacrifice, and lifts high the standard of the public wellbeing. The other, who has been all the time inwardly corrupt, cannot meet the strain placed before him. With equal calmness he sacrifices the public good and upon the ashes of the dethroned justice he erects his palace of self-interest.

Take the more personal relationship of friends. Here, if anywhere, this principle meets its test. On the one hand, you have that type of friendship which is nothing more or less than selfishness, in which we make use of people for our own comfort and satisfaction. So long as they serve us, and reflect upon us to our advantage, we are very glad to call them our friends. But just as soon as anything happens which shows that those whom we have used as our friends will demand something of us in the way of sacrifice, calling upon us to share with them some conventional misunderstanding, or even some more serious disgrace, then we begin to drip away like the dew before the sun's rays. We do not measure up to the standard demanded by

⁴ Matthew 7:17.

Emerson. "Thou must give me a part of thyself. Thou must bleed for me."⁵ That kind of friendship is rare, indeed, it must be rare. We cannot be so tied to very many individuals that we can bleed for them all. But at least to those few choice ones of our circle of friends, we must, if we are men, be tied to them by bonds that demand sacrifice that goes the full limit of the true vicarious suffering. By our fruits we are known, but our fruits are determined in character by the quality and the purity of our thought life and our inner faith.

In the questions of our allegiance to great principles, we meet the same problem. Do we adhere to, and expound those principles because they give us the comfortable sense of respectability, and a fellowship with the great and well-known, or do we adhere to them because they appeal to us as true and for their truth we give them a whole-souled allegiance that demands an unswerving devotion? Do you believe because other people do, or do you believe because you have found something true and have rested your faith on the rock of ages, the experience of the human soul in the glory of human life?

As we answer these questions do we, not so much by word of mouth as by the unfailing test of years, proclaim ourselves as good or corrupt trees? Remember this above all things else, that the true nature of our work, its ultimate influence, and its final worth, is determined by the true nature of our inner and secret thoughts, our personal beliefs, our deeper convictions. In times of crisis, in moments of great importance when the scales of life are balancing between good and evil, between smallness and nobility, the weight that tips the scale is the weight of our personality, determined by the nature of our thought, the integrity of our belief, and the purity of our purpose. In the world of thought we are comparatively free, but in the long run our thought world will determine and transform the environment in which we live into the reality fashioned according to the image of the world that we carry in that all-powerful powerhouse of human thought and noble conviction.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) 19th century American writer and Transcendentalist. This quote is adapted from his essay, "Gifts," in *Essays, Second Series*, first published in 1844, reprinted in *Essays and Poems*, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, Everyman Library, 1995, p. 257. The quote reads, "The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me."

This principle I wish to apply to certain very definite concrete problems of everyday life such as you and I have to meet. For in the recognition of the close relation of clear thinking to right living is the great secret power of the personal happiness and efficiency of the individual.

In the world of thought we are comparatively free, I said. I realize, however, that thought, belief and convictions are modified, and often very seriously interfered with, if not quite destroyed, by the subtle influence of a mental and local atmosphere as well as by the brute force of [the] physical environment. But in as much as we are chiefly concerned at the present moment with the relation of clear thinking and right living in the individual, we will assume a normal, and on the whole healthy environment, such as we enjoy, and will defer until another occasion the consideration of the question of thought and action as determined in society. Of course it is true that the good tree, planted on poor and unfavorable soil, cannot bring forth good fruit. For the moment, and with truth so far as we are concerned, we assume...⁶

⁶ Here, unfortunately, the manuscript ends, incomplete.