

Keeping Back a Part of the Price

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This strange little tale connected with the history of the early Christian church, is a delightfully human document. Apart from certain obvious exaggerations that are intended to add to the dramatic effect of the story, this incident is so characteristic of a certain type of person that one can almost see how this Ananias looked as he came walking up to the apostles and laid his money at their feet.² Indeed, it seems worth our while to take time to recall this situation just for the sake of understanding its full significance. As you will recall, after the tragic death of Jesus the apostles came together, fired by the enthusiasm of his life, and consecrated by the glory of his death, to continue the work that he had begun. In the spontaneous allegiance of their souls to the glorious vision of a new heaven and a new earth which, under the guidance of the gentle Nazarene, had been opened up to them, they cast to the winds all other considerations and gave themselves body and soul, and all their possessions to the glorious and glorifying task of teaching the gospel, of disclosing to men the glory of life and the coming of the kingdom. So completely and absolutely had this become the one aim and purpose of their lives that they banished from their minds the possibility of any other considerations. Even the goods and the private wealth were given over, and held in common for the common needs of their lives. This whole-souled enthusiasm was contagious. People flocked to them, and cast in their lot with the beginners, laying their goods also at the feet of the apostles. Still carrying in their minds the image of the noble personality of the wise laborer who but a few days

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from August 30, 1908 to November 26, 1908. A handwritten note on the first page of the manuscript says, "Adams, March, 1910; ???, March, 1910." Evidently, Davis reused this sermon at least twice, once in Adams, Massachusetts and once in another—unfortunately unreadable—location, both times in March, 1910.

² See Acts 5:1-11.

since had been speaking to them, still influenced by his glorious idealism, linked to him by the infinite charm of his vital interest in the soul of man, these people were living in the exhilarating atmosphere of a moral idealism. It was life, blood and purpose for them. By the strength of its penetrating light, they, the simple common folk of the Palestinian towns, had become transfigured into the image of the infinite and the eternal manhood and womanhood. You may question their judgement, you may smile at their wild enthusiasm, but you cannot question their motive and their purpose. They were among those whose purpose, whose enthusiasm, whose lofty idealism has been and still is the saving grace of the world. They had hitched their wagon to a star. They had seen something that was more to be desired than gold and precious stones, they had caught a glimpse of the wisdom of the ages. This high moral purpose was like a scent of a new-mown hay that is born to us on the wings of a sunset breeze after a long dead sultry July day. It was refreshing, invigorating, soul-stirring, a breath from the infinite. The multitude felt the warmth thereof and rejoiced.

Now into the midst of this invigorating atmosphere of the spirit comes this man Ananias and Sapphira, his wife. They too had seen these people cast their goods into the common pile, they had seen that something was going on. They did not understand, indeed, they could not understand, for they were not used to ideals and moral purposes and lofty enthusiasms. They saw these eager, expectant people, and they could account for their joyous expectancy on no other grounds than that this community of goods was some kind of a pool into which they had entered for the purpose of getting [a] corner on eternal happiness and eternal wealth. If there was any such thing going on, if there was anything to be gotten out of this thing, Ananias and Sapphira wanted to be in on the ground floor. But they could not find out just what the market price of this new venture was. So, they found themselves between the devil and deep sea. If there was anything to be gained, they wanted it. But they were not quite sure. They did not have the faith to go the full length and invest all their property in this undertaking. If this new kingdom was really to come, Ananias and Sapphira wanted a comfortable place in it. But should it prove to be a failure and should collapse, and they should be left out in the cold, they wanted something to fall back on. So, they did the safe and the sane thing. They sold their property. Half of it they hid away, to be used in case this new venture failed.

The other half they laid at the feet of the apostles and thought that they had paid a sufficiently large price to enable them to enter this group of idealists. They were of the type of many who like to become idealists and reformers if it seems likely that it is going to be a paying proposition. You can almost see the expression of their faces as they presented themselves to the apostles and piously laid their price of admission at the apostle's feet. Of course, the apostles saw immediately that Ananias and Sapphira were not the right sort, and the two speculators were immediately taken to task for it. The story tells us that they fell down dead and were carried away and buried. The charge made against them was that they had been guilty of lying to God. They had been two-faced. They had posed as reformers; they had expressed their wish to join this group of whole-souled idealists, but their purpose was mean, sordid, selfish, even to the point of dishonor. For their duplicity, they died.

But let me state in other words the grave offense of which they had been guilty. They had thought that they could purchase their entrance into this glorious world of idealism for a certain sum of money. That once in, there they could derive all the benefits, reap all the possible rewards, and become a part of the new heaven and the new earth for the simple price of admission. They did not know that the contribution to this group that counted was not the contribution of goods and wealth, but the contribution of the joyous whole-souled moral purpose, life for the joy of the living. What these idealists had contributed to the common store in the way of things and wealth were incidental to them. The real price that they had paid for admission to this group was the clear vision of a moral purpose, a complete faith in its value, and a whole-souled consecration to its realization. What Ananias and Sapphira had contributed was a sum of money. They had no vision, they had at best a half-faith, and no consecration. They went into the thing for what they could get out of it. They were essentially selfish, self-seeking people, even to the point of ignominious conduct. The thing was a sort of an investment for them. They had no purpose, no ideal, but that of some kind of gain.

On the one hand, you have the type of person who, in the presence of the ideal, stops not to consider whether it will pay or not, whether it will bring credit upon him or not, but simply takes it, if it appeals to him as truth, as his voice of God,

and puts himself and all his at its service in joy and in consecrated devotion. On the other hand, you have the man who is honest, if it happens to be the best policy, but who is bound to be around when the returns are coming in, who is willing to father any good cause if it will reflect credit upon him, or bring him some kind of return for his investment.

I have analyzed this story at length because in it you have a good, clearcut illustration of a great principle of life. You cannot purchase at any price, except the price of achievement, any of the things that are worthwhile. You cannot hold back one iota of the glorious whole-souled consecration demanded of the life that lives. Every bit that you hold back as a selfish reservation for your own security is just so much deadly poison that is destroying and eating away the very heart of your existence. It makes little or no difference what may be the particular thing into which you may put yourself, if you make this selfish reservation, if you do not give yourself body and soul to the realization of the truth that you see, you have already registered the moral and the spiritual death of your being. This does not mean that you will not be able to feel and to see and to hear and to taste. Of course, if you are living just for that kind of a life of sensational pleasure, you can get it all spiced to your taste, just as long as you have the money to pay for it. When that is gone, your life is gone and you are left to die alone in some lonely out-of-the-way spot, where you will not be an offense to the world that you have lived in. But if you want to live, to get a glimpse of the eternal and the infinite life, to feel the joyous glow of a vital engrossing purpose, you must cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint yourself at first hand with Deity. That idealism of which Kipling³ speaks as a hope for another world, should be a living reality in our lives here and now, every day that we live.

And only The Master shall praise us, and only The
Master shall blame;
And no one shall work for money, and no one shall work
for fame,
But each for the joy of the working, and each, in his
separate star,

³ Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) English writer.

Shall draw the Thing as he sees It for the God of
Things as They are!⁴

But, add to this high individualism of Kipling's, the common life of man which only Walt Whitman⁵, that poet of the divinity of the common life, can give, and we have a suggestion of what life really should be and is, if we but let it.

One thought ever at the fore—
That in the Divine Ship, the World, breasting Time and
Space,
All Peoples of the globe together sail, sail the same
voyage, are bound to the same destination.⁶

But let me make a little more specific just what I wish to say. In the first place, the things that are worthwhile cannot be bought. Truth, life itself, everything in life that distinguishes the life of man from the life of animal, has been wrung from out of the soul of things by a hard and sometimes cruel labor. Do you wish to enter that world where Emerson⁷ lived, you cannot do it by buying a set of Emerson's books. You must read, think, read, reconstruct, absorb, give-out a lavish hand, feel the living image of his presence standing over you, enveloping you with a halo of his mystic flights of thought and aspiration. You must achieve by experience the truth that he achieved. Can you keep pace with him as he flits across the seas and down the ages, catching up into his soul the spirit of infinite truth, and putting into these lines the whole doctrine of revelation and inspiration.

There is no great and no small
To the Soul that maketh all:
And where it cometh all thing are;
And it cometh everywhere.

I am owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Caesar's hand, and Plato's brain,

⁴ Rudyard Kipling, "When Earth's Last Picture is Painted," 1892.

⁵ Walt Whitman (1819-1892) American poet.

⁶ Walt Whitman, "One Thought Ever at the Fore," in *Leaves of Grass*, Volume III, ed. Oscar Lovell Triggs, New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1902, p. 32.

⁷ Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) American Transcendentalist and writer.

Of Lord Christ's heart, and Shakespeare's strain.⁸
That may be achieved only as you give your whole soul without
any selfish reservations to the understanding of the heart of
humanity.

What, think you can purchase the insight into the Lord
Christ's heart by saying like a parrot the fragments of speech
that come down to us through the ages, or by crying "Lord,
Lord?" Know you not that to purchase the cherished glimpse of
the soul of the noble Nazarene, you must walk with him the same
via dolorosa that he travelled, you must go with him alone into
the Garden of Gethsemane. You must feel the sorrow of the world,
you must feel the joy of life, you must give body and soul for
the life of those with whom sail the voyage of life together. I
say these are the things that are worthwhile. They can only be
obtained by the achievements of life. They are lasting; they
will glow when the sun grows cold and mixes with Deity.

But there is one more illustration of what I am trying to say
that I wish to speak of. Yet even here I cannot say, I can only
suggest. There are certain evident facts that point in the
direction of a menace to the home life and the integrity of the
family. I need not point out to you that in no small degree
these gruesome tales are possible because there are people who
think that love and the home life can be purchased, either for
money or for some other kind of a price. But here again we are
dealing with the mysteries of the soul, and, as the anguish
revealed by many incidents of common knowledge declare, the
household god dwells only where love's light keeps burning the
fire on [the] hearth.

The secret of the great life is the great vision, the complete
faith, and the whole-souled consecration. The secret of that
moral and spiritual death, more horrible by a thousand times, is
the selfish reservation, the disingenuous duplicity of Ananias
and Sapphira. It is forever creating a hell of anguish more
terrible than even Dante could picture. But now a breath of pure
moral idealism quenches the fires, and ministers to the souls
that hunger and thirst after the truth and the life of the
living God.

⁸ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Informing Spirit," in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Poems*, Volume IX, New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co, 1923, p. 282.

But in the background of all that I have been saying has lurked the thought of the pressing need in this life of ours of a lofty vision, of a complete faith, of a whole-souled consecration that shall lift us away from ourselves, and our things and our selfishness and our petty reservations, and carry us by the might of its compelling force away from all the hideous discordant noises of the day. Something lofty and grand that shall defy our very faith and challenge every resource, and finally carry us by the sweep of its omnipotence out into the great sea of the open and the noble life. I love to live and to enjoy the little movements of the small circle in which we move, but I want to feel that the great body is moving with an irresistible might towards some great, better and purer life. I want to feel the pulse of new born desires surging through my very being. Do you not long to be a part of some great movement that shall cast behind it all conformity, and push its way straight to some far off goal, and drink deeply of the truth of the life of the human soul, that shall challenge its heroism, and arouse that adventurous faith that burns behind it all bridges and presses forward with the undoubting ardor of youth into the unknown future. I find this same feeling in all that I read. It cannot be that I find it there simply because I feel it myself. We are getting tired and sick of feeding on these dry and close-cropped fields of Prosperity. Here and there some lone soul or some small group are looking up to catch the glimpse of new fields. Now and again we hear the voice of the idealist, now and again we hear the word of the prophet. By and by, they will see the true and the commanding vision, and the complete faith will come, and the whole-souled consecration will follow. Then they will cast there all into the common pile and take their way over the hills to a new resting place on the way to the kingdom of God.

Already the voice of the idealist is being heard. You, who have long cherished the precious wealth of a great moral purpose, restrain not your enthusiasm, let it glow to a white heat, and cast its light abroad. You have a precious thing, that indefinable unsaleable ideal of yours. Give it without reservation and with it give yourself, and your all to that great glorious adventure in which you see no profits but the infinite joy of living and working for the life of man. Be sure above all things else that you do not make the mistake of thinking that you can buy your way into this growing life of a

new dispensation, which, like a new growth upon the mountainside, is putting forth its fresh and living branches above the decaying timber of a dead commercialism. You must feel its pulse, hear its call, and respond with all your soul. The multitudes are yet a waiting for the throbbing pulse of a high moral idealism.

Just as I was finishing this I chanced upon one of Emerson's poems that was made for just those who have some clean pure ideal that they have cherished in the secret chambers of their soul, and have nurtured that it might be ready for the fullness of time.

Be of good cheer, brave spirit; steadfastly
Serve that low whisper thou hast served; for know,
God hath a select family of sons
Now scattered wide thro' earth, and each alone,
Who are thy spiritual kindred, and each one
By constant service to that inward law,
Is weaving the sublime proportions
Of a true monarch's soul. Beauty and strength,
The riches of a spotless memory,
The eloquence of truth, the wisdom got
By searching of a clear and loving eye
That seeth as God seeth. These are their gifts,
And Time, who keeps God's word, brings on the day
To seal the marriage of these minds with thine,
Thine everlasting lovers. Ye shall be
The salt of all the elements, world of the world.⁹

Do you not feel that even now you are being married to a great army of those who have cherished ideals, and are now being wielded into a mighty stream that by the power of its irresistible momentum shall bring a new heaven and earth? Can you not feel within your grasp the power of Caesar's hand, and Plato's brain, the Lord Christ's heart and Shakespeare's strain?

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, in *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Poems*, Volume IX, New York: Wm. H. Wise & Co, 1923, p. 381-82.