

The Open Way and the Life of Man¹

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During the last three or four Sundays I have tried to present to you the moral and spiritual relationship between men, and the same relationship between men and The Unseen. What I said in those sermons was essentially this. The successive events and the complete development that constitutes the life of the ordinary personality, derive their significance, both for themselves and for the life about them, from their natural qualities and characteristics, qualities and characteristics which are finite manifestations of infinite principles of [the] universe in which we live. We are made in the moral and spiritual image of God, and in due time when we become conscious of these qualities and characteristics, we recognize their universal relationship, and interpret the unseen Infinite in these terms. We make God in our image. Thus we bridge the chasm which has always been regarded as existing between the finite and the infinite. Or there is no chasm, but the way is open. Man may look to the unseen, and with a pure heart may absorb its light of truth, may be warmed by its life-giving heat and may grow by its spiritual nourishment, as the flower is given its color by the light of the sun, and grows in the fostering warmth of its heat.

Applying this same principle to the problem of moral conduct, to the relationships between men, as I did in my sermon last Sunday, we saw that the sanction of moral conduct does not rest upon any supernatural laws of morality laid down by any institution, or revealed by any person. Morality rests upon the recognition of the nature of man. To treat man as a moral and spiritual being, and not as a thing. It is immoral and evil to steal, not because the ten commandments say that it is. It is

¹ As was accepted practice at the time, here are throughout this text Earl Davis uses the male pronoun to refer to all humans, male and female.

² This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from May 24, 1908 to August 9, 1908.

immoral because to take from a man the things which are the channels of expressing his personality, is to treat the man himself as a thing, and thus make void the fundamental principle of human life. The present conditions of our social life are what they are because men violate in secret the principles of life which they profess to uphold, and upon which they themselves depend and which they demand as their right. Our relationship to each other as men derives its final sanction from that open way from the secret chambers of one human personality to the secret chambers of another, along which the pure and the understanding heart may travel into the realms of infinite truth and moral purpose and effective will.

Thus through the knowledge which we glean from the experiences of common life, and our sincere attempts to interpret them, we arrive unto the wisdom of truth. In the knowledge of that truth shall we become free.

II. But I wish to go into this point a little more in detail. What does it mean in its full significance when we say we come to understand the nature and the characteristics of the unseen world through the knowledge which we derive from our own personal experiences, and the experience of others, and which we translate into its universal significance? It needs some further illustration. The scientist tells us that the events of natural life give us sufficient evidence to compel us to believe that we live in a world of law and order. He takes his telescope and studies the movement of the sun, stars and moons. The precision with which they move, the periodic accuracy with which they accomplish their revolutions announce to us that their movements are all in accord with an infinite and iron clad system of laws. Indeed so dependent and so subservient are these bodies to the all-powerful laws in accordance with which they move, and with such accuracy do they obey their commands, that the astronomer knows that he can [place] implicit confidence in their conduct. He knows for example that tonight at a certain second a star, so small that he cannot see it with his naked eye, so far away that it takes millions of years for its light waves to reach us, can be found by him with its telescope. That star is at a certain spot in the universe at this moment. The astronomer can determine where. He knows it will pass in its movements a certain definite spot at a certain moment of time tonight. So he take his telescope, trains it to a certain angle of elevation, and puts his eye to the lens to watch. His catalogue of stars

tells him that at 20 minutes and 35 seconds past eight o'clock that star which he cannot see with his naked eye will cross the meridian circle upon which his instrument is stationed. As the time approaches he begins to look for his far away heavenly friend. Nothing is to be seen as he sits down to look, nothing is there under the whole canopy of the heavens is there upon which he can hang his faith that at the proper moment the star will appear, except his unshakable faith in the universal and absolute sway of Law. Behold, now, across the face of his lens the star appears, at the very fraction of a second it crosses the line that marks the meridian, true to its implicit obedience to the unseen law. Then it passes from the range of vision of the astronomer out into the unseen from whence it came, still obedient. The astronomer turns away, confirmed in his faith that he sees and knows something about a world of law and order. His feelings and his thoughts are not less deep and profound, indeed they are the very same I fancy, as were the Psalmist's when looking into the mysterious depths of the heavens, he uttered the poetic truth, "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork."³

But again the biologist finds the same evidence of law and order as he studies with the searching lens of the microscope the minute forms of microcosmic life. Beginning with the most minute cell, he traces the evolution from the simplest forms up through to the most complex and intricate combinations in the higher animals. Here too all is law. Here too is implicit obedience to that system of law which is involved in the evolution of life. The jellyfish contracts and moves according to law just as the star, nor is there any variableness nor shadow of turning. Every plant, every flower, every animal still proclaims Law, declares to us that all these events, all these forms of life, have their setting in an unseen background of forces and principles which act in a fixed and reliable manner, so that the observing eye of man can depend upon them, and, given the conditions, can foresee the result.

But we must not stop there. We have yet to note another factor that enters into the development of affairs. A few weeks ago there were located in some dark boxes in a store certain little seeds, which contained the possibilities, under proper conditions, of germination, growth, and the bearing of fruit. At

³ Psalms 19:1.

the same time back of my house, was a small plot of ground which offered the proper conditions for the seeds to grow and to produce according to their kind. But the seeds were not in the ground, they were in the store. There were, however, thousands of seeds in that plot of ground, but they were not the kind of seeds that would produce the fruits that I desire to be produced there. The ground did not have the power to bring the seeds to itself, nor did the seeds have the power to get out of the dark and unsuitable box, and find their way to the plot of land back of my house. It was necessary that another force of the universe be brought into action in order that those particular seeds should germinate and grow to maturity on that particular soil. To bring this about it was necessary that power of human personality brought to bear upon the situation. Therefore, understanding more or less clearly, the nature of the ground and the characteristics of the seeds, and having before me the purpose of producing the fruits which those seeds could produce on that piece of soil, I purchased the seeds and put them into the ground according to the best of my knowledge, acting under the direction of my will. In this simple illustration I have suggested to you three qualities or endowments of the human personality, which seem to distinguish it from the other forms of life which we have been speaking of. We have here the power of knowing, of reasoning, and of willing. We see that these powers are not peculiar to any one individual, but that they are present, in varying degrees of efficiency in all men. Here again we have the evidence in the events and facts of life of the universal force, unseen to be sure, but nonetheless evident, that expresses itself in the essential characteristics of human beings. Following the same line of reasoning as we did in the case of the evidence of a world of law as disclosed to the astronomer, from fact to principle, we come to think that there may be in this unseen world of forces and laws in the midst of which we live, the universal characteristics, which I have said are a part of the endowment of man. Is the universe from which, as a source, these concrete qualities of understanding, and purpose, and willing, come an intelligible universe, as well as a universe of law and order? In view of the facts before him the scientist says that it is a world of law and order. In view of facts also, the student of history, the philosopher says that it is a universe in which the unseen is an intelligent, purposeful, willing force. To say the same thing in other words, our faith, resting upon the confirming evidence of human experience, is

bold to declare that God is intelligent, that he reasons, wills, just as the scientist says that God is a God of law.

Not only do the heavens declare the glory of God, but nature speaks of his law, and man by his very life and its nature thereof, declares that God is manifested in the knowledge, the reasoning and the willing of man. That these characteristics of man are the finite expressions of infinite characteristics, that God is to be thought of in the imagery of our own characteristics.

III. Incomplete⁴

⁴ Here after Roman numeral III is handwritten "Incomplete."