

The Bearing of Burdens

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In the passage which I read from Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, are two sentences, uttered in almost the same breath, that seem to be almost polar opposites in their meaning. The first one, "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ"² is hardly off the point of the pen before the other, "For every man shall bear his own burden"³ is written. One of these, you would say, expresses tenderness, and the other harshness; one speaks from a heart of love, the other, from a hard almost cruel indifference; one is unselfish, the other is selfish; one has its origin in the infinite, the other in the limitations of the finite; the former, you would say, speaks of, and breathes the atmosphere of the eternal truth, while the latter has grown out of the most earthy of temporal experience. How worldwide is the difference between the exhortation to bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ, and the cold and unsympathetic declaration that every man shall bear his own burdens.

Yet is it not true here as in most of the great vital principles of life that the two principles which seem to be in direct opposition to each other, are in reality supplementary. The true method is not to cleave to one at the exclusion of the other, but rather to adjust the one to the other so that in the resultant force of these two opposing forces we may find the true line of conduct.

In spite of its apparent harshness, that statement of Paul's to the effect that every man must bear his own burden, is the statement of an essential and fundamental truth. We live in a world order in truth and goodness and beauty. But insofar as we

¹ This is from the bound collection that includes sermons from May 24, 1908 to August 9, 1908.

² Galatians 6:2.

³ Galatians 6:5.

have developed above the moral and the intellectual condition of the animal, we have done [so] at the cost of hard labor and unceasing effort. That which distinguishes us from the animals with whom we have in common many traits and characteristics, is the unseen world of ideals and moral purpose which constitute the saving grace of human life. That which distinguishes the man of the type of Jesus from the savage is not the difference in the physical world in which they live, but the difference in the unseen world of idealism in which each lives.

That we know of truth, what we know of goodness and beauty, we have learned and gleaned from the thousands of years of human experience. Not even is heaven given away nor may the appreciation of the beauty of the world of nature be had for the asking. It is true enough that all the glory of the world lies spread out before you, and the heavens declare the glory of God and the Firmament showeth his handiwork. But how much of that glory do we now understand after the thousands of years of searching for its hidden secrets? Here and there we have caught a glimpse of the infinite laws, and have been transfigured by the glory of their splendor. What we do know is known by virtue of the fact that men have taken upon themselves the work incessantly asking that they might receive, of seeking that thy might find, of knocking that the door of eternal truth might be opened unto them, and that men might gain entrance to the inner secrets of the world of knowledge. Today if you or I would see the things that they have seen, we must walk along the same pathway of truth. There is no royal road to the world of knowledge. If we would see through the eyes of the spirit the glory of a moral purpose, we must take up our burden of duty and travel over the same via dolorosa that all the great moral leaders of man have traveled. One of the cruelest, the most immoral, and the most preposterous bits of deception that has ever been perpetrated upon man is the teaching that Christ in his life and his death has made it possible for you and for me to share in the vision of the glory of a moral purpose such as ravished his soul without going over the same road that he travelled. What he did do was to do something in the way of breaking up the traditional barricades that so effectively shut men from ever getting a glimpse of the real glory and beauty of the life eternal, and thus rendering the approach to them easier. But to think that Christ paid the price that is required of you and me for entry into the kingdom of heaven, is to misapprehend the first simple principles of his life. The

kingdom of which he taught is not a place to which we may or may not go, but it is a spirit which enters into you and me and transforms the essential purpose of life and creates a condition of life. He could no more purchase our entry into the kingdom than we could purchase his. That is a personal problem for each one to solve for himself. That, I take it, is the deeper meaning of that seemingly harsh statement of Paul's that every man shall bear his own burden. To use another of Paul's statements, we find the same idea in this, "Every man must work out his own salvation with fear and trembling."⁴ There are no free passes over this sea of life. "He, who does not work shall not eat"⁵ was the ultimatum of Captain John Smith directed to his Jamestown colonists, and he was giving but a specific application of this great principle of life.

Oh, none may reach by hired speech of neighbor,
priest, and kin.

Through borrowed deed to God's good meed that lies so
far within."⁶

Whatever you may know of truth, whatever you may understand of the great moral purposes of life, whatever you may see of the mystery of the unseen, that is yours by virtue of your own personal work. We live in the midst of, in the grip of great unseen powers and forces, but we may only understand them and feel the power of their transforming grandeur as we achieve by personal experience the moral and spiritual power of their worth. Every man must bear his own burden, and work out his own salvation with fear and trembling.

Now, this truth has certain specific applications that must be considered.

Captain John Smith directed his famous remark specifically to those people in his midst who ate out of the common crib, and

⁴ Philippians 2:12 puts it this way, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling."

⁵ John Smith said these words at Jamestown in 1609. They paraphrase 2 Thessalonians 3:10, "For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat."

⁶ These lines are from Rudyard Kipling's (1865-1936) poem, "Tomlinson," Published in 1891.

did not make any specific return in the way of labor for that which they had eaten. As I understand the situation in which we find ourselves today, there is a pressing and vital need of again issuing this ultimatum. From this point of view we are sadly missing in our practical demands that the laborer shall be worthy of his hire. The city of Boston affords a very pointed illustration of the extent to which our body politic supports a large number of parasites, who eat not only their bread without making the just return in the way of labor, but who at the same time destroy the moral life of the body which supports them. To what extent this is done the nation over, who can say. We are inclined to lament over the tremendous cost of the idle poor and the criminals, but the danger from this source sinks into comparative insignificance in the face of this gang of political parasites and leaches.

Closely connected with these, and indeed of the same nature must be considered the idle rich. Not having earned their wealth, they know not its significance. With a blasé effrontery that is at once disgusting and pitiable, repulsive and discouraging, they strike at the very heart of all the principles that make society and the common weal possible. The poverty of their moral and spiritual life is in sharp contrast with their physical comfort and luxury. But even now the command has been issued, and it will shortly be enforced, that such people cannot and will not be tolerated in this nation, unless they make a proper and adequate return in for their keep. They are not bearing their own burden, but indeed are become an extra burden upon those who already have more than they can carry.

Insofar as you and I do not make a proper and adequate return in labor that shall make for the physical and moral well-being of man, we are parasites upon the body politic, and are a burden upon the shoulders of someone.

I will not speak of the idle poor and the outcasts in this connection for I feel very keenly that we are already too much inclined to heap upon their shoulders the sins of our own shortcomings as well as their own and the lord knows that their short comings are sufficient. But consider the fact that in the city of New York each year there are not less than 9,000 persons that are buried at public expense, because of the fact that there are no relatives or friends to claim the bodies, no one to feel the loss, no one to stand over the lifeless body and have

one feeling of regret, or to respond to one faintest suggestion of human love. Can you picture to yourself the almost limitless tragedy of physical suffering, of mental anguish, of lonely and desolate hungering and thirsting after life that this vast number of human souls, cast lifeless upon the shore of the great passionate sea of metropolitan life, represents? Whatever may have been their responsibility for the outcome of their life, they have paid to the last farthing the full penalty. Is it not true that their life and its tragic ending is much in no small part because others of greater opportunity and equipment in life have shirked this simple duty that each one shall bear his own burden. The question that immediately concerns us is this, are we giving a full and honest return in our own labor for that which we receive? Are we sure that we are not contributing to the excessive burdens that crushes into the mire each year thousands of human souls that should receive the help of our hand instead of the cruel push and shove that sends them over the line to a life of degradation and ignominious shame and death? Are we sure? I say every man shall earn his own bread and the place to sleep and to live, unless infirmities hinder. Are you and I earning ours?

But does not the same principle apply to the world of knowledge. We may buy books, and fill our libraries to our heart's content with all the best and the choicest books that have ever been written, but they avail us nothing unless we have the will to pay the price of extracting from their mysterious pages the great truths and lofty ideals with which they abound. But more than that, is it not true that we do not even understand the truths and the principles and the ideals that we study in our books until we have taken them from the books and strengthened them by experience and transformed them into our own truth and our own ideals? Indeed, is it not true that we cannot take one single gem from the written records of man until we have lived enough, and thought enough, so that we are appreciably near to the standard that we find in the book? We may read the words, and the sentences, but to get at the ideas back of them all that is an achievement that can be accomplished only as we pay the price required in labor and thought.

In view of this truth does it not appear that we are lamentably weak in assuming the work thus involved. It is a principle of law that ignorance of law, is no excuse for violating it. That is a just principle which has its roots deep

in the nature of the universe. Is it not true that we are held responsible as a matter of fact, not only for what we know, but also for what we do not know? Do you escape the ravages of disease because you did not know that your conduct would result in the disease from which you suffer? Do we escape the loneliness that results from the selfish life simply because we had not discovered the selfishness leads to isolation? Do we escape the malarial infection of pessimism simply because we did not know that an honest and healthy activity is demanded of the human soul? The laws of compensation work with unerring justice. We not only may but we must understand the world in which we live. The question for us at this moment is this, do we respond to the task thus placed before us, or do we try to rely upon some neighbor, priest, or kin and accept what they say so as to avoid the trouble of looking for truth ourselves? Believe me in this, your neighbor or priest or kin may be able to tell you some facts, or indeed he may present before your mind some ideas, but not until you have lived it, absorbed it, transformed it and transfigured it, will it ever become a satisfying food to you. The truth shall make you free, but it can only make you free as you drink it in, absorb it, make it a part of your very self, and make yourself a part of it. Truth is void for human life unless it becomes personalized, and personality is void without truth. In the mystic union of the finite soul with the infinite truth and beauty, is the response of the part to its universal consecration in the realm of truth. Do you and I assume the full share of our work in revealing to the world the mystery of the infinite truth? Are we doing it?

We are at the moment the acme of things accomplished, as we are the container of things to be. The whole world of moral purpose stretches out before us, urging us, bidding us, begging [us] to take up the work that its interests demands. We stand by in mute admiration at the enthusiasm with which we see people work in some great moral conflict. We regret that we are on the outside, but we cannot enter into the midst, share in their delight and take part in their glorious work. We say that we cannot share with their moral idealism, because the facts of life compel us to think that what seems to them to be a moral purpose is nothing more or less than a vapid sentimentalism of passing importance. Thus did the scribes and the Pharisees think of Jesus. Thus did the Roman church think of St. Francis. Thus it thinks today of the modernists; thus did they think of the leaders of the reformation, but in the overthrow of feudalism

they learned that there was something real behind that high moral purpose. When one tells me that he does not see any evidences of moral purpose in life, he does not tell me anything about the world outside of himself, he simply tells me that he has never risen to the heights of moral purpose himself. He has not yet done the work necessary, he has not paid the price of admission into the world of moral purpose. Too often the work which we sometimes call the work of moral reform is regarded as a burden, and one grievous to be borne. Too often we shirk it, and let it go by default, and thus we help to make up the thousands of outcasts and forsaken ones of our social order. But because we do not see, and because we do not work, is by no means proof that we have demonstrated the lack of moral purpose in the life of man. Lorenzo and his followers in Florence did not see any purpose in life beyond intellectual culture and immoral pleasures, but they had not risen to the moral heights of being able to go into the lonely cell of the humble friar Savonarola and seen the world of moral principles with which he was battling.⁷ I say that there is a world of high moral purpose and it is open to man on the same conditions that the world of truth is open to him. He must live it and experience it. He must absorb it and transfigure it and be transfigured by it. Then it becomes the guiding light and the controlling aim of human life. Have you take up this burden? Are you sure that you are doing your work? For every man must bear his own burden here as elsewhere.

Now you are wondering why I am calling these common everyday functions of human life burdens. You say to me does life not derive its significance from these very functions? To know the truth, to express that truth in labor under the compelling force of a high moral purpose, is not that life itself you say? Why then call these functions of life burdens? Are they not rather life's opportunities?

But do we as a matter of fact accept them as such? Or, if we do accept our work as the medium of expressing our inner

⁷ Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498), Dominican Priest and leader of Florence from 1492 until his execution in 1498, was famous for his clashes with tyrannical leaders and corrupt clergy. Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-1492) was the de facto ruler of the Florentine Republic from 1469 to his death in 1492.

purposes, why is it that so many have shirked their opportunity to such an extent that thousands of our fellow citizens have to expend all of their time and strength in earning bread. If [we] accept our opportunity in the world of thought, why is it that thousands still prostrate their minds and their reason before an obsolete authority? If we accept our opportunity in the world of moral purpose, why is that these political and social wrongs still continue to exist with no word or deed on our part to ever signify that we have a breath of protest to utter? Is it because we appear to treat these opportunities of life as burdens, and still more, because in so treating them, we create and make possible the real burdens of life, that I have so called them?

But cannot you see how the whole significance of life would be transformed if we could but rise to the height of actually seeing in this search for truth, and in the transforming of that truth, productive action, under the impulse of a moral ideal, the true and the real aim of human life. How rapidly would our discontent disappear? How like the few barnacles on the side of the ship would the real burdens of life appear. How the feeling of emptiness and purposelessness would give away to a deep and abiding satisfaction. Then, indeed, shall we know the truth and the truth shall make us free, and in the freedom of the truth shall we come to see that in fully and completely responding to our own opportunities, we rise to the heights of bearing one another's burdens, and thus we fulfill the teachings of Christ and the truth of the living God. I rejoice at the extent to which you measure up to this standard. May we see more and more clearly how this truth goes to the very root of human life, giving nourishment and strength to your life and to mine and to the life of every human being, and to the social order in which we live.