

The Moral Conscience and the Needs of the Times

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All over the city you will find little garden spots where peas, beans, cucumbers and various other vegetables are growing. The owner of the garden will tell you the merits of the particular kind of peas that he has planted, and why the beans that are growing in his garden are better than the beans that he might have planted. You look over the crops that he is producing, and compare the results that he has attained with what his neighbor has done and you are quite willing to say that he has made wise selections of seeds and that he has been a good husbandman.

Had you been around at his house some evening during the latter part of March you might have found the gardener sitting before the fire pouring over seed catalogues, reading the descriptions of the different varieties of seeds, getting the information necessary for a fair judgement as to the seeds best suited to his particular needs and his particular location. This is followed by the actual choice of the seeds, and then comes the planting of the seeds and the careful nurture of them, and finally the fruit is produced and the cycle of events is complete. First, the desire [of] the garden as the means of producing fruit; Second, the gathering of such information as will bear upon the subject; Third the weighing of evidence, and the choice of the most fit; Fourth the sowing of the seed, and the nurture of the growing plant; and finally comes the fruit of the entire process.

This outline of the process of planting the garden holds true in all the activities and interests of life. It suggests a universal process, natural to, and operative in, all the actions of human life.

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

I have used this illustration that I might point out the facts and the potential forces involved in the problems of the times in which we live. From the point of view of the religious and moral interests of our time, we may be said to have been engaged for the last few years in the problem of gathering information, of comparing the relative merits of the various systems or ways of life that this information tells us are possible in this great garden of human life in which we live, but the time is fast coming when we feel the necessity of making a choice of definite lines of action and planting the seed, nurturing its growth, and making ready for the harvest.

Not long since I pointed out the fact that the Christian Church had its origin in a great moral purpose, and insofar as the Church has recognized that this moral purpose is its true foundation, it has been effective in the life of the individual and in society. The great foundational purpose is two-fold in its working—first, it seeks the interest of the individual personality, striving to touch the secret springs of the higher life; and second, and no less important, it seeks to render the conditions of life such [that] the best qualities of life may have a free opportunity of developing. This purpose of inaugurating the rule of love in the life of the individual and in the world in which he lives is the rock on which the Church rests. The purpose is to produce righteous men and women living in a righteous world.

For the past few decades men have been occupied with the work of collecting information and making choice as to the ideals that will best serve the ends of establishing in fact this world of righteousness which has been the dream of the ages. The claims of various systems of thought, of all kinds of creeds, and religions have been investigated. Nothing has been spared, with almost a cruel relentlessness the most sacred traditions have BEEN PROBLED to their very heart's core to see what there might be of eternal worth and value for human life. Men have searched the very inmost recesses of their lives in the quest for the holy grail of the satisfying life. Slowly and steadily the winnowing process has been going on day and night, in sorrow and in joy, for the purpose of separating the passing and the transient from the eternal and the abiding in human life and the unseen. But the battle of the creeds is now over. From out [of] the great mass of traditional material we have gleaned the essential spiritual principles. The remainder has been burned in

the fire, and the ashes have been scattered to the four winds of the heavens. We know the foundations of the new faith. Our own experience tells us the tale of the unseen world ordered in truth and goodness and beauty. Our own life and its deepest aspirations tells of the infinite possibilities of the human soul. We ask for no authority but the authority of God's truth as it comes to the sincere and honest heart. We feel the infinite mystery of the life in which we live, its pulsating throbbing aspirations after deeper experiences and the deeper thoughts of the spirit. Out of the mysterious confines of the unseen comes the commanding voice that speaks to us of forces and powers that are eternal in their operation, and infinite in their scope. We feel and we know our relationship to them. The eternal truth and the eternal goodness and the eternal beauty find their incarnation in the soul of man, in your soul and in mine, in the soul of the outcast and forsaken whose life, crushed and stained by the avarice of a Pharisaic world, is even now ebbing away into the unseen from whence it came, in the souls of those who, true to their ideal, have lived the life eternal in this glorious world and human life. We are sons of the spirit.

We know the seed that we would plant. We are now asking ourselves, "How do our principles square with our actual conduct?" The focus of the lens of the spirit has been changed. All attention has been directed to, and is held upon, the one great question as to the actual incorporation of these great principles of life into the everyday affairs of men. What is the church doing to establish the supremacy of man in the affairs of business? Are our schools the efficient servants of the moral and the spiritual lives of our children? Are we inspiring them with the ideal of [a] clean simple honest life which shall have its proper shares of hard work, clean recreation, and above all else, shall preserve unblemished and in the face of all oppositions youth's fairest and cleanest dreams of manhood and womanhood in its noblest sense? Or [are] we inspiring them with false and deadening ideals of wealth at any price and power at the cost of their nobility, and pleasure at the sacrifice of all that they should hold sacred in life? Are our courts of justice, and our systems of prisons and reformatories working in the interests of the life of man or are they convenient and respectable mechanisms for removing from our midst those who, by their ignorance or because of their lack of proper opportunity, have become obnoxious to us, and disturb the peace of the select

circle of our heaven made possible by their damnation. Is our industrial life conducted on the principle that the end and the aim of all activity is to minister unto the deeper and the spiritual needs of humanity? Or [are] we engrossed entirely in the work of making money at any sacrifice to human life and the principles of conduct that thousands of years of experience have placed at our disposal.

You know the answer that must be made to these questions. The volumes upon [volumes] of apocalyptic literature that have been poured from our printing presses during the last hundred years tell you the tale that you are loath to admit. Men never send forth the cry of lamentation and express the deep longing for a new heaven and a new earth unless they feel the heavy burden of the conditions as they are. Why is it that you hear the dire threats of those whose suffering has become intolerable? Why is it that you hear the low distant rumbling and the moaning sea of humanity as if it were a forewarning of a great storm? Why is it? You know and I know why it is. It is because you and I do not actually treat ourselves and those with whom we live as if they were temples of the living God. We think that we may purchase our ease and our comfort and our luxury at the expense of the intolerable labor, the mental poverty, the moral and the spiritual degradation of thousands of men and women, if perchance we do not come directly in contact with the outcast fruits of our cruelty and our selfishness and our Pharisee-ism. I call to your attention as an illustration of this fact an article in the current number of one of our magazines in which there is the description of the source from which one of the largest and the richest and the most charitable churches in the country. I wonder which will last the longer, the sound of the prayers and the anthems and the hymns declaring their faith in Christ, or the sighs of suffering and the wails of children who languished in those sinkholes of filth in the tenements owned by this church of Christ and from which its revenue is derived. Methinks I hear the voice of Amos sounding strong and clear down across the ages speaking as for God,

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Yea, though ye offer me your burnt offerings and meat offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the notice of thy songs; for I will not hear the

melody of thy viols. But let justice roll down as waters and righteousness as a might stream.²

But is not that fact more or less an illustration of just the kind of a thing that we are all doing? Do you not see that there is a sharp far-reaching contrast between the Christianity of the churches and the Christianity as it finds its living expression in the lives of men.

Sacramentalism and charity are no longer competent to meet the needs and the demands of the times. We know beyond the adventure of a doubt what the ideal standard of life is; we know that the plumb line of judgement is afoot upon any line of conduct may have on the human personality. We are called upon today not so much to pass intellectual judgement on creeds and doctrines as to pass ethical judgements upon institutions and conduct. As a result of our false ideals of life and our false standards of aspects of life that are worthwhile, we are exercising a pressure upon individuals that amounts to a moral overstrain upon the conduct. There is a pressing call upon us to bring our moral conscience to bear upon these standards, and whatsoever thing does not square with the essential principle that the righteous personality is in the end and aim, must receive in no uncertain terms a judgement of condemnation. There is a very pointed and significant passage in Paul Sabatier's *Life is St. Francis of Assisi* in which he considers the wonderful influence of St. Francis, and also of Jesus, as compared with the sterile influence of today.

When we hear preachers going into raptures over the marvelous spread of the gospel preached by twelve poor fishermen of Galilee, might we not point out to them that the miracle is at once more and less astounding than they say? More—for among the twelve several returned to the shores of their charming lake, and forgetful of the Mystic net, thought of the Crucified One, if they thought of him at all, only to lament him, and not to raise him from the dead by continuing his work in the four quarters of the world; less—for if even now, in these dying days of the nineteenth century, preachers would go forth beside themselves with love, sacrificing themselves for each and for all

² Amos 5:21-24.

as in the old days their Master did, the miracle would be repeated again.³

This life, this relationship of men and women together in the fellowship of a church of the spirit, is not merely a formal relationship. If it is anything, if it is what it pretends to be, it charges us not with the duty so much as with a passion, a deep purified love for and consecration to human soul and its life in which there shall be unfolded the purpose and the will of the divine. Do you not see the glory of life that is before us? Will you not, true to your avowed principles, make that the guiding and controlling motive of your life, and enter into all of life's activities to seek the deeper meaning of life's work, and pleasure and choice experiences? Get away from the shore, put out into the deep, cast down your nets, there where the life is free, there where the ideals are rich and large and together with the sons of the spirit work for the coming of the kingdom.

³ Paul Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1894, p. 279.