

The Spirit of the Evangel

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Pittsfield, MA

July 5, 1908¹

I wish to speak this morning on the subject, "The Spirit of the Evangel." It is a subject which one hesitates to approach because it is so big and far-reaching in its relations to human life and goes to the very root of human conduct and the problems of society that one fears lest he treat it so inadequately as to make it seem trivial and even of no importance.

There are two great principles of human life which are so closely related to every act and thought that it may be said that they constitute the warp and woof of the fabric of life which we weave. They are sometimes spoken of as principles that are especially characteristic of the general religious movement known as Protestantism. There is some truth in this statement that they are the characteristics of Protestantism as distinct from the other religious movements. The point is this. Within Protestantism they are the declared principles, the apparent foundations upon which the movement rests, while within the Catholic domain these real foundations are concealed beneath a false superstructure of tradition and authority. The first of these principles is the essential belief in the direct communion of the individual human soul with the infinite. Not through priest, or institution, or sacrament does the human soul come into the knowledge of the beauty and the glory of life, but through the direct influence of the unseen spirit of the universe upon, and in, and through the soul of man. Of this fact of the Mystic sense, of the ability and the inclination of the individual man to climb to the mountaintops of moral and spiritual truth and see with the naked eye the whole range of moral purpose, I will not speak this morning. Events of your own life bear witness to this fact.

It is the second great principle of Protestantism, or rather of human life wherever it may be found, that I wish to speak of

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

this morning, the principle of the Universal priesthood. If I understand the essential theory of the Priesthood it is that the priests are a body of men who have become, by virtue of a supernatural rite, the accredited servants of God for the purpose of instructing and guiding people in the ways of the religious life. Only those who have received the supernatural power are able to do the work of instructing and leading in the affairs of the spirit. In sharp contrast to this in outward theory at least is the protestant principle that the function of ministering to the moral the spiritual needs of men is not the exclusive function of an order but indeed is a natural function of the human soul. Thought, high purpose, moral and spiritual ideals are by their very nature dynamic, and are constantly tending to express themselves in human conduct. I said last Sunday that he who had been onto the mountaintop of moral and spiritual idealism, who had seen into the meaning of life, had also heard in the stillness of his communion with the unseen, the searching words, "Thou art the man," has felt his personal responsibility in the life of man. This is the principle of the universal priesthood. The very fact that you can think, places upon you the moral obligation of transforming into moral conduct your high and noble thoughts. You must come down from the mountaintops, transformed and transfigured, to throw yourself with all your soul into the work which is before you.

There are three general principles by which life must be guided in living this life of the spirit. The world in which we live is an unfolding and evolving world. Take a cross-section of it anywhere and you will undoubtedly find that it is not complete or perfect. Many things have been done, but wheresoever you put your foot down you will find evidences of incompleteness. If you have been on the mountaintop you will at once know that the great task of your life, indeed the great opportunity and privilege, is to throw yourself into the work of making a contribution in the evolution of the world.

Now the world in which you are to do this work, which means so much to you, is a world ordered in truth. Everywhere is the reign of law. Not alone do the stones in the street and the stars in the heavens obey the laws in accordance with which every least thing happens, but also do you with your noble ideas and your high thoughts. You have seen that something must be done, you have heard the words, "Thou art the man," but it still remains for you to determine what must be done and how to go at

it. Your good intentions are not sufficient to assure the efficiency of what you do. You must have the understanding heart, you must judge with righteous judgement, you must see the world, not only from your own point of view, but you must enter into the very heart and soul of others and see the world with their eyes, let the world speak to you through their eyes, you must feel the weight of their burdens, know the beauty of their hopes. Oh, if we could but understand the deeper meaning of the unrest and the discontent of today; if we could but see into and understand the inmost yearnings of this restless seething generation in which we live; if we could but know what it is in truth that they want, that they seek for half-blindly, then someone might touch the hidden spring, and out of the very barrenness of the rocks of our commercialism, and our worship of things there might break forth a stream of the spirit which would transform the arid places of life into the gardens of beauty. Can you not stop for a moment in the rush of life to listen to the low sweet note of an overtone that is striving to make itself heard amid the din of life? Do you not see and feel that it is the one tone that you need to know in order to touch the very heart of the generation in which we live. Sometimes I think that I hear it rising clear and distinct above the noise of the day. Then again it is drowned out by some harsh discordant note. Listen and strive to understand the deeper meaning of our times. It is there, and it is waiting for someone who shall give voice to its heart and soul. Until we know that deep need, we shall be but marking time in all our work. Again I say listen that you may understand. Acquaint thyself at first hand with the Deity, and read the truth of his revelations in the living Christ of humanity today. That is the first essential, the understanding heart.

But to what end would you understand? What is your deep and secret purpose in all that you hope and do? This is even more of a test question than the one of the understanding heart. The one unpardonable sin of life is to blaspheme the holy spirit of human life. Your purpose must be as clean and as pure as the stream that flows from the granite ledges of the New England hills. In your relationships in the fellowship of this church you come together for the open and avowed purpose of contributing to the moral and the spiritual well-being of this community, and through this community to the moral and the spiritual well-being of humanity. Is this open and avowed purpose always clear and distinct before you? The Christian

Church had its origin with those who loved the human soul. They had seen the latent possibilities of humanity. In order to realize these possibilities more effectively they came to gather in the fellowship that developed into the church. The church was the means through which they must work. Humanity and the realization of its possibilities, the bringing in of the kingdom, that was the purpose. As is natural, you have a deep and far-reaching affection for this church. A church becomes in time not only the fellowship of workers but it becomes the abiding symbol of an eternal purpose. It comes to breathe the atmosphere of the divine forces which it symbolizes. But never must the love for the church symbol of eternal purpose, and the repository of beautiful and sacred tradition, gain supremacy over the love for the essential purpose of human life which is the church's one foundation. The churches, the denominations of the churches, however deep and true may be our love for them, must not strand in the way of the human soul. The foundation of it all is a deep, searching devoted respect and active self-sacrificing love for humanity as the temple of the living God. I fear that that is the real trouble with the churches today. They complain that they are being forgotten, and no longer hold the place of influence that they once did. Is it not they themselves have forgotten that in its deepest sense it is true that love is the power that rules the world and sways the heart of man? The open, the avowed purpose, that must be held to. We cannot blaspheme the holy spirit of truth and human life. But whether it is in the church or in any other relation of life, sail as true to the polar star of your purpose as the mariner does. If for a time the star is hidden from you by overhanging clouds, make it your first work to find your true course as soon as the storm is past.

But vain and foolish is your noble vision, useless and idle is your knowledge and understanding unless we have the will to transform it into action. This is the final test of efficiency. "I ought" must be transformed into "I wish;" and "I wish" must be transformed into "I will." It is glorious to be led up to the mountain and see before one all the wonderful work to be done and to hear the words, "Thou art the man," but it thrills one to the very soul to hear the answer go back clear-cut and resolute, "Thy will be done." Here is where we lose our courage, drop our tasks and slink away defeated in the only work that can make life rich and full. You see clearly the moral ideal of business conduct. So long as it does not involve very much loss to you it

is easy enough to follow it, but do you see that the moral principle is of such vast importance, that your business interests must give away before it and even though it cost you the last penny and reduce you to utter poverty, there must be no compromise with a moral principle? Your will must become the channel through which the Infinite Will reveals and realizes its deepest purposes. You have a more or less clearly defined ideal of the proper relation of man to man. You know that you have no right to achieve your own advancement at the expense of the moral and spiritual degradation of another, you know that the ideal of human life declares that you shall love your neighbor as yourself, that his interests shall be on the same level as your own. But have you the faith and the courage to make that the actual fact of your practical life, or does it shade off here and there in your own interests, or sidestep just a little to avoid meeting the real issue fair and square? Are you living for these principles of the moral and the spiritual life, is it your purpose that they shall be your rule of faith and of life? Or do you adhere to them just so long as they do not cause you to make any great sacrifice in their interests? We have had remarkable and glorious illustrations of human lives to which the adherence to these principles have [been] the guiding principles and the one motive. Do you not see that whatever we have today of liberty and moral beauty has been laid at our feet by the sacrificing work and heroic devotion of great souls to these great principles? Jesus gave up all the things and the opportunities of life that most of us hold dear, that he might obey, or rather in his obedience to his moral idealism; more than that he could go to the bitter end, and, in his faithfulness to an ideal, could achieve by his death one of the greatest victories ever won for the life of humanity. In the same cause and for the same purpose Savonarola² could live his magnificent life and face the horrible tortures of his trial in his unswerving devotion to the truth and humanity. Thus also have thousands of noble men and women in all ages and in all times and under all conditions lived true to the life of the spirit. Thus also must all do or be ready to do, if they are to be among those who have made the progress in the richness of human life. If ever one needs to go alone into the presence of the infinite to find the power and the courage to will to do the

² 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.

will of God, it is when he is face to face with the conflict between his own interests and moral truth. This is the supreme test of life. I would that I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I had the faith and courage to meet it.

In the knowledge of the understanding heart, unified and purified by the purpose growing out of a deep and abiding love for the human soul as the temple of the living God, consecrated and made effective by a glorious obedience and whole-souled allegiance to the truth of the living God, out of this arises the spirit of the evangel that carries its message of eternal love and abiding faith to the human soul that is thirsting for the life of the living God, that says unto the human soul, "Come unto me all ye that are labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."³

³ Matthew 11:28.