

The Motive of Conduct in a World of Righteousness

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Men have always had in their minds the ideal of that condition of life in which people would live according to the highest principles of conduct and aspiration. We do not have to depend entirely on our present day conceptions of the ideal community for what the principle and motive of conduct in a world of righteousness should be. The earliest traces of written historical information disclose to us the fact [that] men have always desired to live under conditions that should be better and cleaner than the conditions under which they actually have lived. To go back no earlier than the time to which the tradition of Moses carries us, we find Moses, as he tended his sheep for his father-in-law, the Priest Midian, struggling over the fact that, while he was enjoying the easy life of a shepherd, his people were suffering the hardships and burdens of a cruel service under Egyptian bondage. The condition of affairs which he knew existed did not square with what he knew the condition of life ought to be. Therefore, in spite of the difficulties before him, he determined to leave his quiet peaceful life as tender of sheep, to go down into Egypt, to free his people from their bondage and lead them into a land flowing with milk and honey, that they might live in a world ordered in righteousness. But no sooner is this thing accomplished than these same people see that the things they have accomplished do not satisfy them. They must still press forward to a greater task.

Again in the prophets we find the same spirit that demands of men that they must not be satisfied to enjoy the results of work already accomplished, but they must ever press forward in the work of developing and establishing a world of men ordered in righteousness. This work is a human necessity, a necessity

¹ This is from the third bound 1908 collection that includes a couple of reports and several sermons, which—except for this one—duplicate sermons found in 1908 bundles #1 and #2. So, while this sermon is not explicitly dated, it certainly is from 1908.

however which rests not on any external command, but a necessity which finds its sanction in the very nature of man himself. Man is just that being who is endowed with a divine discontent, and must forever continue his restless search for the alluring ideal of a world of righteousness, which, like a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,² leads him along the paths of progress forever. In his dream and in his life work of leading the children of Israel into the land of progress, Moses is true to the best of human nature. So also was Amos true to the best of human nature when he came from the plains of Tekoa pleading for a world of justice, saying unto the people of Israel with the voice and the courage of the prophet,

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 meal offerings, I will not accept them; neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take away from me the noise 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.³

In a less violent, but not less searching, statement does Micah discharge his duty as the prophet of righteousness and proclaim the true motive of conduct in a world of righteousness, "God hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"⁴

Here is human nature expressing itself in terms of its highest conception of life, and calling itself to the fulfillment of its highest duties. Here we find the expression of the deepest inherent impulse of man's nature. Of the same character and significance is the message of Jesus to the world in which he lived. Casting aside as non-essential all else in the whole system of religious and social life, he declares only for the clear understanding of the two great principles of human life, "Thou shalt love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart and ... thy neighbor as thyself."⁵ or as Jesus expressed it in another place, "All things therefore that ye would that men should do unto you

² Exodus 13:21.

³ Amos 5:21-24.

⁴ Micah 6:8.

⁵ Matthew 22:37-39

do ye even so unto them, for this is the law of the prophets.”⁶ It was, he perceived, the essential truth of this ideal of life that he turned the full force of his invective against the Pharisaic manner of life with its outward piety and its essential inward selfishness and wrong.

This same idea has been the burden of the message of all the great souls of history, of all those who have lived and worked after such a manner of life as to make the world a better place in which to live, and life itself to teem with high purpose and become enriched with the light of glory and splendor that gives to daily living its significance. In Tolstoy’s *Resurrection*⁷ this truth is given a setting that makes it stand out clear and bold in the background of present Russian life. “What is the cause of the suffering and immorality and cruelty of Russian life as it is lived today?” asks this man who is the central figure of Tolstoy’s book.

Why is it that a young person as free from any desire to be cruel and to cause suffering as a new born babe, why is it that such a one develops into a man or a woman who, either by active participation, or by unprotesting acquiescence, fosters a condition of social life such as exists in Russian today?

This is the question constantly in the young man’s mind as he wanders about in the prisons and among the peasants of Russia. Suddenly to his inquiring mind comes the answer to his perplexing question. The reason why such conditions exist as do exist is to be found in

the fact that men think that there are circumstances in which one may deal with men without love; and there are no such circumstances. One may deal with things without love; one may cut down trees, make bricks, hammer iron without love; but you cannot deal with men without it, just as you cannot deal with bees without being careful. If you deal carelessly with bees you will

⁶ Matthew 7:12.

⁷ Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). His novel *Resurrection* was first published in 1899. Earl Davis has written elsewhere about Tolstoy. See in particular his sermon for September 13, 1908, and his undated manuscript—certainly from his time in Pittsfield—“Count Leo Tolstoy: A Tragedy of the Times.” See <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/count-leo-tolstoy-a-tragedy-of-the-times-undated/>.

injure them, and will yourself be injured. And so with men." (*Resurrection*, Book II, Chapter 40.)

Here it is again, the same old heartless and cruel conditions such as Moses found in Egypt; such as Amos and Micah found in Judea; such as Jesus found in Palestine; such as Tolstoy found in Russia; such as you and I know exist today right here in this nation of freedom. We recognize the fact that in spite of the great progress that has been made in the establishment of the principles of right conduct since the days when the children of Israel escaped from the oppression of their Egyptian masters, or in spite of the fact that conditions here are vastly better than they are in Russia today, we are by no means able to affirm that justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Else why do we have to recognize the fact that during the past week thousands of children have been working in factories, and coal mines under conditions that not only destroy their bodies, but absolutely crush out from their lives all possibility such men and women as you and I would wish our children to become and are striving to have them become. Or to go one step beyond, why are we compelled to admit that thousands of men and women have not received sufficient wages for their week's work to enable them to live decently and under clean and healthful conditions? Why do we have to admit that today when men and women are given a day of rest and opportunity for recreation there is presented to their minds no other possibility than gross dissipation and destructive immorality? So dwarfed have their minds become as a result of the conditions and the manner of life in which they have come to maturity, that now any other kind of relaxation and pleasure than the kind they turn to as by instinct has become almost an impossibility. Why is it, also, that we have to admit that in many a place where there should be a home filled with all the delights and all, the immeasurable elements such as exist in a home ordered in love and righteousness, there is at this moment nothing but strife, contention, suspicion, jealousy, cruelty and all the cursed conditions that mar the peace of the household, tear its members thereof asunder, and scatter them broadcast over the face of the earth? I say, "Why is it that we have to admit the fact of these conditions and bow our heads in shame as we acknowledge them?"

The answer to this question is the same answer that was given by Amos, by Micah, by Jesus, by Tolstoy, by all the men who by virtue of their lives have made the world better today than it was two thousand years ago. These conditions exist because we think that there are circumstances under which we may treat a human being as we would treat a thing; that there are circumstances under which we may deal with a human being without love; that there are conditions under which we may ignore the nature of man and for our own convenience override his claims to consideration and destroy him and ourselves at the same time. Herein is the root of all evil. That which is personal, moral and spiritual we treat as if it were a thing to be weighted or measured and bought with a price. We have to acknowledge the fact of child labor because we think that a child is a thing worth so much in the labor market, and because we prefer to sell the body, mind and personality of the child for the price of increased dividends, low prices. We have child labor because we consider that there are circumstances when the child is to be bought and sold like a pound of butter. Again, we pay low wages because we think that there are other things that are more important than the making of good strong, healthy, noble-minded men and women, namely, the making of large profits. Because we think that it is more important to make goods cheaply than to make men good, we pay low wages, and try to make amends for the evil results of our avarice by charitable provisions for the poor workman. We have homes broken up because we think that money is more important than the spiritual powers that create the home, because we think that we can purchase love and kindness and affection with money, because, in short, we think that we can treat the human personality just as we would a piece of furniture, to be bought and sold. Thus we shut ourselves from the heaven into which we would enter, and then think that there is no such heaven.

As a natural consequence of violating the laws of a world of righteousness, we are living in a world where righteousness, and still with longing hearts and often with bleeding and broken hearts, we struggle to free ourselves from bondage under which we labor. Here we are face to face with these conditions. I cannot think that anyone of us would or could ever be the direct perpetrator of any line of conduct that would result in bringing about child labor, or extreme poverty, or gross immorality. Yet as a matter of fact we are all partners to the affairs. Perhaps some of you went yesterday to the store to purchase some cotton

cloth at a very cheap price, and it did not occur to you to find out whether or not that cloth was made by children or grown people. Of course, it would do no good to have asked concerning the wages paid, because anyone knows that the workman in the cotton mills does not get enough wages so that he can live decently. But on the whole, you prefer cheap cloth to good men, and excuse your selfishness by saying that you cannot afford to pay more than you did pay. But that is only another way of saying that you do consider that there are circumstances under which men may be regarded as things. How long do you think that these mills would employ child labor if we should refuse to buy their goods? Or take another case. All winter we have been using coal in our stoves and furnaces. Has it ever occurred to us that the slate was picked from the coal by boys who ought to be out at play? Or, indeed, it is possible that we may derive some of our income from these very mills and coal mines in which children are employed. For the sake of money we permit strange things to happen. I was told the other day of a woman who is a very prominent church worker in the town in which she lives. She is also especially interested in the W.C.T.U.⁸ and is a very strong advocate for no-license in her own town, but at the same time she owns a large block of stock of a brewery in the neighboring town. It is this willingness to accept money from any source, to buy cheap goods no matter how nasty they may be, to break or cause to be broken, either directly or indirectly, all the social and moral laws that should regulate the conduct of men, it is because we are willing to do all these things for the sake of money, that these conditions exist about us. The problem of temperance is very much agitated at present. It is almost overlooked in the discussion, and yet it is essentially true, that the most dangerous aspect of the situation is the fact [that], in the interests of trade and for the purpose of making money, men not only seek to meet the demand as it exists but they make every effort to ruin human lives for the sake of the profit that may accrue to them through the instruments of destruction. We are all in one box. Let him that is without sin cast the first stone, said Jesus.⁹ You and I, however hard we may try, cannot stand aside and think that the hem of our skirts are clean. They are not clean, they are soiled and they are stained. There is still a lack of righteousness in the world, and we, you

⁸ Woman's Christian Temperance Union, founded in 1874, still in existence as of 2023.

⁹ See John 8:7.

and I, continue to treat men as things of value to us and of interest to us only as they serve to make our life as easy as possible.

In the face of this situation, what may be done by one who really believes that there are no circumstances under which we may deal with men without recognizing over and above all else their worth to themselves and in themselves. In short, what should be my principle of conduct if I really think that the one great purpose of human life is to live to the realization of the highest of man's possibilities? We have to recognize the fact [that] the world we live in is far from a perfect condition, that our world or righteousness is still partly dream and partly reality. What can one do in such a world? The answer to this question is the same old answer that has been on the lips [of] man for hundreds of years. It is what Amos called living in justice and righteousness; it is what Micah called acting justly and loving mercy; it is what Jesus meant when he said that men should [do] unto others as they would that others would do unto them, and what he meant when he said that men should love their neighbors as themselves; it is what Tolstoy means when he says that the recognition of this truth and this truth alone, will free Russia from her cruel bondage under which most of the population now lives.

If we do not want to exterminate those conditions, if we want to enjoy our ease and comfort at the expense of the children and the man who lives in want, if we are really willing to let this backyard of suffering, ignorance and vice and passion remain the hotbed upon which the luxuries and comforts of our life are nurtured, then let us do away with our talk about the golden rule and the brotherhood of man.

If we do really wish to live as in a world of righteousness, then we must subordinate to every other consideration of life to the one of giving the freest scope and the most effective assistance to the development of men and women who shall have characters and aspirations of the same high order as that of Jesus Christ. In our direct relations with men, we must never permit ourselves to think that there can exist conditions under which we have the moral right to purchase our own advancement at the price of the injury to another. No man has any moral right to take advantage of circumstances and pay a man in wages a sum less than is required for a decent and modest living. Had we the

strength of convictions such as we should have, and must have before we can regard ourselves as men in fact, as we think we are in theory, the sun would not go down before we had made our open declaration that henceforth we would deal with men as men should deal with him, and that the sound of our protest against the conditions that now exist should not cease to be heard; and [the] power of our work to better those conditions should not cease to be felt until justice flows down like waters, and judgement like a mighty stream; until we do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with our God; until we know that there are no conditions under which one man may treat another man or another woman as a thing to be used for his own comfort and ease; until we treat men as men and insist, not by force, but by character, that they treat us as men and women. Greater still, we fail of the greatest enjoyment and satisfaction of life because we do not realize that when Jesus said that we should seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,¹⁰ that he had gone to the very foundation principle of righteousness and had declared the nature of the one great motive of the righteous life in any world is to honor, respect and work upbuilding the human soul. This is the law and the prophets.

¹⁰ See Matthew 6:33.