

The Inevitable Compensation of Thought and Conduct

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If possible I wish to suggest a thought that is not so commonly taken account of in these days. It is with the greatest satisfaction that we note the gradual change, not only in popular but in ecclesiastical circles as well, from the idea that we live under the rule of a God of wrath and jealous self-esteem, to the idea that we live in a world ordered by an intelligent good-will. No less satisfactory is it that we can note the change from religion tinged with insanity, to the idea of the religion of the healthy minded, as Prof. James calls it.² All this marks steps in moral progress.

Yet one cannot fail to note that with this change, which is decidedly for the good of man, there has also come another change of a weakening and insidious character, subsisting under the shadow of the great and essential principle, to which it is but a parasite, at once softening the rigor of the principle and sucking from it its very life blood.

As I said above the keynote of interpretation of the nature of God was expressed, not so very many years ago, by the idea of a God of wrath. Divine justice was a strange capricious thing, more akin to the justice delivered by corrupt politicians, than any other thing to which we may liken it. It was not a thing ordered in respect or in love, based upon achievement, or merit. Neither did purpose have anything to do with it. But the mercy and the loving kindness of the Infinite was shown only to those we had mediatorial access, and could gain the good will of the

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #4"—that includes sermons from February 14, 1909 to December 26, 1909.

² William James (1842-1910) American psychologist and philosopher, co-founder of American pragmatism. Lectures IV and V, "The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness," from his 1902 *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion Delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*, published in 1902 in London by Longmans, Green and Co. are titled, pp. 78-126.

supreme ruler through the intercession of Christ or some dignitary of the Church. Of course, this idea of divine justice is much more interesting as reflecting the state of social and political morality of the times under which it developed, than it is of value in giving us insight to the working of that relationship which we bear to the Unseen and the corresponding relationship which the Unseen bears to us. In the natural order of things, the development of our modern ideas of democracy must of necessity have thrown a suspicion upon such an artificial and immoral interpretation of the relation of the finite to the infinite above referred to. Just as we have given up our ideas of a supernatural boss in the social and political life, so we have given up the ideas of a supernatural boss in the religious life, and our reasons for doing this are the same in the one case as in the other. Commonsense and the natural moral instincts teach us better. So we have left behind us the idea of a God of vindictive wrath, relieved by a fickle and whimsical love and special privilege.

More and more we are coming to see that the conditions and the nature of life make for goodness rather than evil, that in the process of development, evil perishes and good survives, that the tendency is heavenward rather than hell-ward, that in the life of the individual and in society the tendency is towards the fostering and the preservation of that which is pure and noble and of good report, and towards the elimination and extermination of that which is vile, ignoble, and vicious. More and more we are coming to see that the world is ordered in intelligence, and in a goodwill, that it makes for the purification and the beautification of life and all of life's relationships. We are, therefore, coming to speak more of the loving kindness and the goodwill of the infinite. We are coming to see that the world, and the Unseen in whom we live, and more, have our being, nourishes truth and goodness and beauty, in human life and in society. Hence we look upon that unseen, and in the exaltation of our feelings and hope, we say the loving Father. We express our interpretation of our relationship to the Unseen in those terms which we use in expressing the most complete and satisfying relationships of our human life, the terms of family life. They become to us the symbolic word of our universal relationship.

Thus has the emphasis been changed from the idea of the wrath to the love of God. It marks moral progress. We make God in our

own image. But under the shadow of this great thought there has appeared in our life today a most insidious and destructive sentimentalism that tends to sap life of all responsibility. Just because we use the word love in our attempts to describe the infinite, it does not follow that we may assume that that love is just a weak and sickly flabby sentimentalism, devoid of moral standards, moved by fawning tears to indulgences, and decrepit in its weakness. Anyone with the least power of observation can see that such is not the nature of things, not the nature of life. There are certain principles of life, call them laws or the divine will, as you please, which determine the conditions of life, and the limits of development. Those principles cannot be violated with impunity. He who violates them must pay the penalty. The rewards and the punishments of life, if you choose to use that term, are meted out with an inevitable precision, and certainty. No one can escape them. While Jesus may have been in error in his idea of the cosmic process, and while it is true that his teaching was of an infinite Father who knows how to give the holy spirit to his children, yet he does not mistake parental love for a morbid and indulging sentimentality. There is a virility in his teaching, that the Church which bears his name, has seen fit to modify, softening the rigorous austerity of his principles, and at times completely obliterating all moral purpose from conduct. We admit that we have no knowledge or insight into the nature of any great day of judgement other than the one that we face each day that we live, but in this passage that I am about to quote we see how Jesus had formulated his conception of a great dramatic judgement day by simply making use of the common everyday facts of human life as he saw it and as you and I see it.

The Son of man shall send forth his angels and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into the fire: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. And the righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their father. (Matt 13:41-43).

That is a cold picture of actual conditions of human life, stated without any sentimental reservations, and stated in its naked form. The nature of the tree is determined by the fruit that it produces, and the disposition of it depends upon the nature. I do not know about any great day of judgement at the coming of the millennium, nor does anyone else, but I do know that in the above there is stated a great truth, operative yesterday, today and, so far as I can see, forever. Nor can

anyone by any hook or crook, by any sidestepping, or mediatorial influence escape the rigor of its just compensations. Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap.

But let us not stop here. This is a strange enigma in the midst of which we find ourselves. We cannot escape reaping that which we have sowed, yet long before we ever come to a point where we may sow in intelligence, the seeds whose fruit we hope to reap, we have to acknowledge the fact that the ground upon which we are to sow has been very largely prepared for us. We do not choose for ourselves, but we have selected for us the area within which we shall sow. More than that we are compelled to do much reaping of fruit from seeds that we have not sown. No one ever stated more clearly one of the plain facts of life than he who said that the iniquities of the fathers are visited onto their children even unto the third and fourth generation.³ But that is only a part of the truth. So are the good things and the accomplishments for ages and ages visited upon us. Walt Whitman's line, which I have quoted so often, states the whole truth of it. We are the acme of things accomplished. We are what we are as the result of what has been, and what original contribution we ourselves have made.⁴

As we look back over the known ages of history and trace the ascent of man, we find that there are two principles that come out very clearly. As man evolves from the animal there appears in him an irrepressible impulse to fulfill the functions of life. Half in blind obedience to instincts that are the essential characteristics of his nature, and half in a semi-conscious following of a purpose, he sets out on his long journey over the centuries. Through wisdom gained from experience, and through the exercise of the constantly increasing powers of thought and self-control, he has inquired after truth, and his inquiry has not been in vain, through hardship and toil unspeakable, he has climbed the stairway of the centuries, and in the sublime moment of contemplation, he dares to think that he is greater than the world, for he can love and think and the world cannot. Today we still find

³ See Deuteronomy 5:9.

⁴ Walt Whitman (1819-1892) American poet, essayist and journalist. Davis has modified a line from Whitman's poem "Song of Myself," verse 44, first published untitled in his 1855 *Leaves of Grass*.

ourselves climbing those same stairways, whose foundations are lost from our view in the utter darkness of the past, and whose uppermost steps are beyond the reach of our wildest imagination. Yet we climb on and on, allured by the light of our radiating visions of truth, goodness and beauty, and impelled by the great power of human life. In tragedy and in comedy, in tears and in laughter, in joy and in sorrow, and withal in an underlying peace and purpose, we have traveled. In the midst of the great moving mass of humanity, we find ourselves, bone of their bone and flesh of their flesh, and blood of their blood, bound together by common natures and common purposes, moving onward in a world and a life ordered in intelligence and in goodwill, yet withal essentially just, preserving and rejecting according to intrinsic worth. God is no respecter of persons.

I have presented the above to recall to your mind the picture of our relationships to the great cosmic process. What is its bearing upon these judgement days that we face in this life so precious to us and to which we cling so tenaciously? How is that peace of life to be assured not alone to us but to all men, for no man can purchase freedom and peace while another is in despair and bondage? Here we turn to that essential and transforming principle of life which we give expression to in the word, "purpose." Get that thought fixed in our minds. Our purpose gives the coloring and the characteristic of the fruit that we bear. In that majestic drama of human life to which I referred, the great power that has given it its character, that has thrown a light gloriousness upon its darkest tragedies, has been the essential and underlying evidence of purpose in the conduct of the life of man. Men have followed purpose, have searched after truth, and in the course of the ages have gleaned something to reward the toil of the years. When the purpose has been large, and the loyalty has been unswerving, there has been no remorse, no bitterness, not despair. Here is a fundamental distinction that we must make in life. Whatever the conditions may be that we are in, however much of hardship they may bring, how often may come an apparent defeat, there is no sting in the fall when the purpose is right. Amid circumstances that would be most depressing to one, there is only the satisfaction of having discovered an error for another, and the flowing warmth of an abiding enthusiasm arising from the larger purpose. Keep the purpose clean, and we may make the most disastrous errors, due to our ignorance and inexperience, we may stumble and fall, we may cover ourselves and others with the mud of our mistakes, and

still we rise up, essentially uninjured, nor have we essentially injured another, to spread our wings in hope and in the peace that gives life its richness. The inevitable compensations of things as they are do not excuse our ignorance, or render a special dispensation in favor of our lack of experience. We break the laws in ignorance, and to all outward appearances, we are treated just the same as if we had done it willfully and in full knowledge, and yet the defeat and the mistake of an error due to ignorance does not bring with it that withering sting of remorse and bitterness that follows in the wake of a conscious violation of what we know to be the principles of life. In obedience to a noble purpose, executed in error, we discover truth, as truly and essentially as in obedience to purpose executed in truth.

Nor are our purposes to be merely personal and negative. We should love our neighbor as ourselves is a commonly used saying. What does it mean? Our purpose must be inclusive. It cannot be a purpose confined to our friends and family, although it must include them. It must be as broad as the scope of our life. While the law of contrast may be operative within certain limits, the joy of my heaven is not increased by seeing and knowing the misery of another's hell. Contemptable is the man who derives the peace of his life from the sharp contrast between the felicities of his own condition and the torments of another. I want to take infinite delight in suffering for my friend, but I do not care to have them reap satisfaction in watching my suffering. Given this noble broad purpose, and the sufferings brought upon us by error, by ignorance, have no vital effect in disturbing the peace of the inner consciousness or marring the moral and spiritual integrity of life. We accept without essential pain, the compensations of our ignorant violation of the principles of life, likewise does society at large accept.

The sting, the misery, the remorse, the departure of peace, the despair, rolls in upon us, overwhelms us, when we consciously and for an ignoble and selfish purpose violate the principles of life, and are made to feel the compensating rebuff as it strikes us down in its impartial justice. We live and move and have our being in a world ordered in an intelligent goodwill. Every thought and act receives its inevitable compensation according to the principles of human life. We cannot violate a single one with impunity. No one is immune from

the operation of the same. Nor is there any atonement by means [of a] mechanical device. Each must take that which is measured out to him, but whether one receives his compensations in peace or in bitterness, depends upon the nature of that purpose which dominates his life. And furthermore, whether the world and the men among whom a man lives receives his compensations in satisfying peace or in abiding contempt and bitterness, in the long run is determined by his essential purpose. The soul's emphasis is always right. As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he. As we sow, so shall we reap and also the world in which we sow. Conscious violation of life's principles is sin, and the wages of sin is death, in a world ordered in intelligent goodwill.