

## An Appeal for Self-Assertion

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In the year of the Christian era, 1910, on the second day of January, we are met here in this building called a church. We are a mere handful of people from out of the population of the city, and but an infinitesimal particle from the human life of the world. But nevertheless, we are here. And pray tell for what purpose? This is the question that the world is asking of us. I do not mean that all the eyes of the world are centered on this little spot where we are met, but I do mean that in the economy of human life, society is always asking what any institution is for, and demanding to know whether or not it is worthwhile. The answer that such an institution must give is always the answer of efficiency. The test demanded of men is the pragmatic test of workability. Now what I want to say this morning bears upon this point.

You remember the story told of Paul to the effect that he had a vision in which he saw a man from Macedonia, calling to him and asking him to come over into Macedonia to help them.<sup>2</sup> If you but stop to heed the voice of plain commonsense, you will always hear the voice of the man of tomorrow calling to us today to help them. It is the voice of the child. It speaks the language of human appeal. In spite of the fact that we realize the limitations under which we are living today, and in spite of the fact that we know that the iniquities of the fathers are visited upon their children unto the third and fourth generation,<sup>3</sup> and in spite of the fact that we really do love those who are near and dear to us, yet we are persistently negligent about answering the call of our children to help the man of tomorrow to live his life. I am referring not to the little personal preparations that we make to assist the particular child to win his battle in

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<sup>1</sup> This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911.

<sup>2</sup> See Acts 16:9-10.

<sup>3</sup> See Deuteronomy 5:9.

the struggle for existence, but to the kind of a world that we are preparing for him to live in.

To my mind, this presents the supreme work of men. I take it that we are here this morning for the purpose of learning how to live, for the purpose of knowing the truth, that the truth may make us free, for the purpose of learning the things that are worthwhile in human life, and getting the common purpose of following them. If we are true to human nature, we are interested not so much in what we may do [to] console ourselves, as in what we may do to give the man of tomorrow a better chance than we have had to seek, and to find, those values in human life that we know to be worthwhile. We are not here to commit to memory the rules of conduct in the past, we are not here to declare our allegiance and obedience to the men of yesterday, we are not here to imitate the conduct of the dead, but we are here to live the rich, full, abundant life in the present, heeding the call of the man of tomorrow to help him live his life. Discounting all mistakes of judgement, and all errors and tragedies of life, is it not a statement of simple fact that humanity as a whole is directed by two powerful impulses: In the first place, by the impulse to live a full, rich, abundant life, and in the second place, to assure to our children all that we have had and more? Something must be added for their benefit. If you take any little group from out of the whole, a family or a group of families, you will find that these two motives are the controlling motives. Life itself for them must be as rich and abundant as circumstances permit, and life for the children must be all that their moral and economic condition permits. Under normal conditions, where the tragedy of evil has not warped the perspective of life, and rendered the outlook cold and barren, you will find, I am sure, that the impulse to provide for the man and woman of tomorrow, for the children of the family, is the stronger impulse of the two. The normal parent works not only that they may live, but that their life may be the bridge over which their children may pass from the imperfections of today to the soulful goodness of tomorrow. I know that the brutal compulsion of necessity sometimes crushes this parental impulse, but taking it all in all, the impulse to live a full, satisfying life, and to transmit that life to the children, the latter impulse being the stronger, are the normal and the natural controlling forces of life. So I am sure that I am not guilty of any sentimental exaggeration when I say that every man of commonsense, if he but listens, hears the voice of the man of

tomorrow asking him to help him to live. That is the big impulse of humanity, and the big parental purpose, and that is why, I believe, that the word, "Father," has been used so much in speaking of the great life that we call God. There is a great human touch in that sentence which Jesus is said to have uttered, "If ye, being evil (finite) know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more will the Father who is in heaven, give the holy spirit to them that love him?"<sup>4</sup>

But in the process of evolution we have become so differentiated, and have become such specialists in living the full, rich, human life, that we have lost, or rather we have not yet gained, a true perspective. We are not always clear as to what kind of a life we believe to be the richest. We look about us and see all the various types of life that men do actually live. Some of them we may discard with ease, for they are so apparently repulsive that they do not appeal to us at all. But as to others, we are doubtful. Nor are we always quite sure just the kind of a life that would be satisfying to our children. We often hear people say that everything would be right if we would but follow the golden rule and do unto others as we would that they should do unto us. But there is just the point. Do we always know just what we would have others do unto us? And if we do not know what we would have others do unto us, how in the name of commonsense, are we to know what we should do unto others?

But really is not this dilemma one that arises out of our superficial view of things? We become specialists, and let the special interest so absorb us that we lose the perspective [and] cease to live, and become mere automatons, acted and reacted upon by the conventional standards of life. We sell our birthright of manhood and womanhood for some mess of conventional pottage. Thus the solidarity of human society is broken up, and we become specialists. We plod along in a mechanical sort of a way, in the old ruts that we have established and sap the very pith from life by keeping ourselves forever shut up to the narrow, and the narrowing, lines of our specialized activity. Thus, we have a class of professional pleasure seekers. They are really set aside as specialists for a continuous round of cold formal deadly pleasure seeking. Having nothing with which to relieve the tension and monotony of this

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<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:11.

inglorious pursuit, they drag their life out, in a gay round of pleasure, which, in reality, is a burden, and a soul-destroying task, when pleasure-seeking becomes a task. These people have forgotten how to live. So have many others.

There are certain normal functions of human life which, enjoyed in the proper relations to each other, make life rich and satisfying. Life become burdensome, dull, uninteresting and positively unbearable, when we are allotted to one of [the] functions and may enjoy the others only vicariously, only by watching, or reading about others. The doctrine of vicarious atonement has been held up to mankind as the one great hope and blessing of humanity.<sup>5</sup> In the last analysis, it is a vicious doctrine, tending to sap human life of its spontaneity, and its original responsibility. It tells us to bury our talents in the ground, and live and attain salvation not through our own experience and growth, but through the experience and growth of another. We are taught that by some event, some experience outside of ourselves, something external to us, shall we reach the peace of human life that passeth all understanding. But that is not so. Nothing can ever bring that peace that reaches down below the surface of human life, and grips our very being and satisfies our hunger and thirst for life, but the eternal principles of human life, keen and vital and true always operating in our thoughts, in our hopes and in our experiences. We cannot live vicariously, any more than we can die vicariously. When we give up, or sacrifice, a function of human life, we take away from life just so much of its true richness. The true values of life must be lived.

More than that, the distinctive work, and purpose that we have before us is to exalt this idea. It is the great truth that distinguishes the life of the modern world from the ancient. It is loving with all thy mind and with all thy soul and with all thy heart the living God that pulsates through all our being every moment that we live. There can be no mediator between

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<sup>5</sup> Vicarious atonement comes from the idea that Jesus suffered for mankind's sins. Jesus' suffering was done in place of human sinners. "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." (Mark 10:45).

human life and truth. That which you have not learned of life and truth in experience, that which has not been stamped upon your being in real life, that you do not know, and cannot know.

Now let me suggest what this means in [the] face of the practical down to the earth problems that we have to face. Let me speak of some of the human functions that really make life satisfying both for you and for me, and for all the world where life is normal. I cannot arrange them in any order of importance. Rather they should all blend into one, like the prismatic colors of a ray of light. They are the things in life that are worthwhile. I will begin with the function of thinking. We are not here concerned with the metaphysical aspects of thought. We simply note it as a fact [of] experience of human life. In the final push of things, I think that something akin to thought is the controlling impulse. I do not mean to say that the intellectual life is the final end and aim. God forbid that I should ever do that. But thought, man speculating, reasoning, explaining, forever pushing the power of his inquiring spirit against the wall of the unknown, forever letting his imagination and his poetic insight carry him step by step [up] the mysterious embankments of reality, ferreting out the laws of life and the laws of nature, yes, that is a great function a great talent of life. This talent, like all other talents, grows in the using, and become strong and sure and effective in its free exercise among men. It is the merit of the present, that we are trying to do away with the attempt to think vicariously. Submission to authority in thought activities belongs to the past. Today, we are trying to think for ourselves. Sometimes we halt and stumble, for in the past we have let others do our thinking for us. That has incapacitated us for thought, and those also who did nothing but think. May we not forget for one moment that we can never put aside the power of thinking, and expect to have life rich and satisfying. The person, who avoids this function of life because perchance he sees that it leads through difficult paths, and may bring pain, is bound someday to reap his harvest of dissatisfaction. We must think for ourselves, and realize that it is better to think an error for ourselves than it is to accept a truth as alms, or wages from another. In the development of this modern life, exalt this function of thinking, and if ever there comes one to you and

tells you that you must leave the thinking to the learned, say to them, "Get thee behind me, Satan."<sup>6</sup>

But thinking alone is not the bread of life. Our thoughts are electric charges that must somehow express themselves in action. One of the most fundamental needs of human life, one of the richest activities of life, is work. Work is the attempt to mold and shape reality after the pattern of the ideal that is within. Every man must work, not merely [as] a bread and butter necessity, but [as] a human necessity. The trouble today is that work is done vicariously. The great mass of our population work, work, work, not because there is joy in it, not because they want to mold reality according to their ideals or the ideals of the world, but because they have to work without ceasing for mere bread and butter, or bread without the butter. One of the greatest blasphemies of life is the fact that the great impulse of man for creative activity should be sold into bondage. Since the days of Plato until now it has been held that it was the function of the working class to provide for and support the ruling class. Thus did Plato arrange it in his ideal state.<sup>7</sup> They were simply to be dumb, mute, unthinking, unfeeling, slaves to provide leisure for those who should think and live without working. They died working that men might enjoy the sweet subtle satisfactions of work, without experiencing its dull heavy routine. But as the old adage says, if you put the chain around the neck of the slave, the other end is fastened to your own neck. If the sight of men and women who are ground to despair by the unrewarded drudgery of toil is pathetic, the sight of the indolent, and vacant-lived idlers is tragic. But perhaps one of the most encouraging, and certainly one of the most important, aspects of the modern life is the growing conviction that no man was ever made for toil alone, and no man was ever made for idleness alone. We are giving up the idea that we can live a satisfactory life, rich, full and abundant, when we let out our function of working, we cut the very marrow out of our own life, and drive the marrow out of the life of those upon whose shoulders the extra burden falls. There is a sound practical suggestion, as well as a grand poetic conception, in the line,

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 16:23.

<sup>7</sup> See Plato's *Republic*. See also Davis' 1910 manuscript, "The Social Ideal of the Modern World," <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/dbaird/the-social-ideal-of-the-modern-world-1910/>.

"Each for the joy of working, and each in his separate star shall draw the thing as he sees it for the God of things as they are."<sup>8</sup>

But there is another function of life, that goes to the very root of things, and that we, rushing, grabbing Americans have almost forgotten. It is the function of idleness. I do not know how we stand the strain of the pace we live, but the suicides, and the insane asylums confront us as a rebuke for our gross and vicious violation of the fundamental demand of human nature for the necessity of idleness. I think also that a large part of the gross intemperance is a just result of the racking grind of ceaseless activity. What we can do at this point I hardly see. The wheels of the machine of modern life are geared to such a high speed, and we are all so much a part of the relentless motion, that it is almost impossible for one, even though he needs it, to just lie down and rest. Yet more than anything else in all our modern life, do we need the opportunity to throw off the responsibility, care, worry, and deadening grind, and lie down like an animal to rest, to dream, to sleep, and to play. We have preached the gospel of activity with such persistence, and with such blindness, we have preached the gospel of the climbing, the gospel of getting on in the world, with such unrelieved brutality, that we are near to the point of breaking. From wearying and useless and senseless hurry, and from uninterrupted grind and toil, deliver us, Oh man of today, the man of tomorrow cries out. And he but echoes the prayer of our own heart that we have hardly the time to formulate. So by no means the least important function of human life, a function that goes to make up the totality of real living, is the function of idleness, of taking time to live, of forgetting for a time that we have ends and aims and purposes, and simply drifting, and resting, and dreaming, and letting the things that we experience have time to soak in. This is the cry and the prayer not alone of those who are bound down to the increasing speed of the machine of work, and toil, but also of those who are bound to the rapid pace of professional idleness. One end of the chain is around the neck of the over-worked, and the other is around the neck of those who never work. In the coming days

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<sup>8</sup> Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936) English writer and poet. These lines are from his poem, "L'Envoi," in *The Seven Seas*, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1897, p. 209.

somehow let us have a chance to be idle, and catch up with ourselves. And live.

Closely following this great function of human life, comes the social function, the function of human intercourse, of knowing men, and having friends, and really satisfying in some sensible way the great social instinct for human fellowship. In the family, in the close circle of friends, among the many ships that we pass in the night, hail for a moment, and never see again. God only knows what life, what richness, what depth of satisfying joy is to be found here. Yet for the sake of our vicious notions about getting on in the world, for the sake of commerce, and industry, we drive from our lives almost all of this rich treasure of life. To have time to know those whom you want to know, to have time to have a home life, and to have time to have a true hearty social life, that is another ideal of the modern world. So, you may go through all the functions of life and see how we bring misery upon others, and misery upon ourselves, because we still cling to that most vicious of all doctrines that of vicarious atonement, as it is practiced in modern life.

These suggest some of the values of life that are worthwhile, that men must know that they may [have] a rich abundant life themselves, and may transmit a still richer and more abundant life to the man of tomorrow. Only as we recognize the solidarity of humanity, and that human life is for just that purpose, to think, to work, to be idle, to play, dream, to enjoy the fellowship of men, and to leave a better world for the man of tomorrow than we received from the man of yesterday, only as we see that shall we begin to touch the deep abounding life in store for men.

This is my appeal this morning that we shall not be meek and humble, servile and obedient to the thoughts and the conditions of modern life that defy and destroy the possibility of these real human values. Goodness and virtue, honor, and nobility, are not negative, they are positive forces. We know the conditions and the forces that make life worthwhile. We know the conditions and the forces that destroy the life and rob it of all its riches and joys. My appeal is this, that we work for the supremacy of these real values. The forces that crush and destroy life, and make it void, they are organized, aggressive, powerful. Let those who see the true values realize their



solidarity of interests, and work together to free human life from the burdens that crush it. Let us assert ourselves as witnesses and sponsors for these real values, feeling ourselves the very agents that have been chosen to reveal them to the world, and to establish them among men. Let us become the incarnations of them, and let them become flesh in us. To be more specific, let it be our clear-cut definite purpose that in this city we shall proclaim these principles of modern life, and see to it that they are on their way to establishment.