

The Demands of the New Year

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The demands of the new year are not essentially different than the demands of the old year. The realities have not greatly changed, and the ideals and hopes are not strikingly different. Yet, in spite of the fact that a great deal of water has passed by this mill of human life during the past year, things that seemed only vague possibilities one year ago are now history. I think that I am not entirely personal in saying that the developments in our common life during the past year have been essentially satisfactory. Into the lives of some of us there have [come] great and abiding joys, joys that reach deep into human experience, and touch life values that abide. Into the lives of some of us have come our share of hardships and cares, but we have not been overwhelmed. We are still captain of the little world that is ours, in spite of the difficulties that we meet. But these personal considerations, however important they may be to us in our own little world, are not the things that we consider together. The things that we consider together are the things that have a common interest for us, the things of life, of humanity. Concerning these common things I wish to speak, and the demands that come to us as a result of the conditions under which we live and the ideals that we cherish, the life values that we wish to preserve and establish.

The primitive Christian looked for the coming of the Lord down out of heaven in a supernatural manner. The kingdom of God should come on earth as it was in heaven. They took no thought for the morrow, they discouraged marriage, they cast aside their property, they considered not the questions of slavery, or poverty, but only this, that they should prepare as many as

¹ This is from the bound collection—"bundle #5"—that includes sermons from January 2, 1910 to January 15, 1911. While the manuscript says, "January 1, 1910," it is clear that 1911 is meant. Not only was this manuscript bound after the December 25, 1910 sermon, but tellingly January 1 falls on a Sunday in 1911, but not in 1910.

possible for the second coming of the Messiah. This second coming they believed would take place immediately, within the generation of those living. They were filled with enthusiasm at the prospect of the glorious kingdom and the wonderful life that they would enjoy in that nearby day when their cherished ideals should become living realities on the earth. What cared they about such things as poverty, or slavery or politics? Nothing at all. They could look into the heavens, and almost see the full, completed kingdom coming to them out of the deep blue. They could almost distinguish the form and features of the Son of Man coming in his glory on the cloud. No, they cared for nothing else, and they were enthusiastic, wildly enthusiastic, at the prospect. They had strange visions, and they spoke with tongues, and they became drunken with the spirit.

For the primitive Christian, during the apostolic days, those glorious days for which people sometimes pray, this wild fancy was the answer to that ever-present question, How can we reconcile facts and fancies, how may we unite in holy wedlock reality and ideality, how may the faith of religious impulse tie itself to the fact of ethical principle and conduct? This is the eternal question of humanity. The primitive Christian answered that the relation of realities to ideals cannot be other than that of hostility. The only way that the ideal may [be] realized on earth as it is in heaven is by this wonderful supernatural messianic kingdom that was coming down out of heaven during their lifetime to supersede the old order, so repugnant [to] them.

But years passed by and no answer to their oft repeated prayer. The enthusiasm faded, apology took the place [of] hope, and compromise with reality supplanted their childlike distain for worldly things.

Still they could not altogether reconcile reality with idealism. So, they devised a new answer to the old question. This new answer made during the centuries we see in the institutions of Catholicism. The laity clung to the world, while the monk clave only unto the ideal. Behind him he cast the world and all its allurements, and wedded himself to the values of the ideal. The monk and the nun gave themselves up wholly to the religious life. They broke all the ties of human allurements, and lived the life of the spirit apart from the world. The priest came inbetween, having partly severed himself from the

worldly and partly allied himself with the heavenly. He lived in the world but not of it. He consoled those who lived in it, and pointed them to the other world. Next comes the laity living in the world and of it, but hoping that through the aid of the priest and the influence of the monk, not to become entirely emmeshed in its entanglements. Thus the answer of medieval Catholicism to the question of the relation of ethics to religion, of fact to fancy, or reality to idealism. Again, it is the answer of despair.

Then comes the answer of Protestantism. The artificiality of Catholicism the protestant could abide. The enthusiasm of the primitive Christian, and his blind faith in the spectacular coming of the ideal to supplant the real, he hardly knew about, nor could he understand it. The kingdom of heaven could not come down to earth, as primitive Christianity believed, nor could the earth, even by the devise of the monastic, attain to the ideal. To the protestant this reality was a vale of tears, but by the grace of God we might go to the ideal in another world. Having survived this life for a period, and endured its hardships, death might bring us to the perfect and the holy in a life beyond death. Certainly, that was a wholesome consolation for people in view of their absolute lack of faith in anything good here. I am glad they had that consolation. But that does not answer the question. The primitive said we cannot hope that anything good will come out [of] the world, but the ideal will come down out of heaven on a cloud and supplant the real. The Catholic said we will build a set of stairs from the lowest of earth worldliness and ascend step by step up to the ideal so that in human life we shall have both the world and heaven, both reality and ideality, both the devil and God. The protestant said neither of these is possible. Heaven cannot be here, nor can it come down to us, but we will go to it after we have passed through this vale of tears. But the protestant view of life was so gloomy that he did [not] expect that the achievement of heaven for all, but only for a few. Each one thought that by the grace of God, he himself and a few others would get in. The rest would enjoy eternal reality.

But in our times we are approaching all this from an entirely different point of view. The ideal grows out of the real. Religion is our faith in the preservation of the values of human life. Ethics is our deliberate effort to make the life of the individual and the conditions [to] nurture and foster those

values. We do not ask that the kingdom of righteousness shall come down out of heaven, but that it shall and will grow and develop in our very midst. The very forces that make reality also make ideality. The ideality of today becomes the reality of tomorrow. God is present in the world working through reality to the achievement and conservation of those life values that are worthwhile. We do not ask for the hierarchy of classes ranging from the worldly to the ideal. We do [not] ask to be transported to another world in which the whole thing shall be perfect, and our only task shall be to sit about the throne and sing in the heavenly choir, and live a life [of] idle purity. The answer which our time is giving to that old question is that we shall share in the work, in the zeal, in the tempered enthusiasm, in the glorious life of achieving for and with humanity the ideal which is the child of reality, and the fulfillment thereof. This is of the utmost importance to us in considering the demands of the new year, the demands that are not personal, but common.

So, the first demand of the new year is just a recognition of this point of view. This hard stone of reality upon which humanity has laid its head for sleep in the dark night of its religious pessimism, turns out to be a monument dedicated to the eternal presence of the living God. During the night, we have had strange dreams, and we have seen the ladder leading direct to ideality, and we are awakening in the glorious morning of a new day, to say with simple reverent spirit, "We knew now that God was there." The sun does not yet shine clear for the clouds of yesterday's pessimism still obscures the light. And the surviving institutions of yesterday's activities still bind and dwarf us. The remnants of yesterday's stock of life values are still offered for sale, although at lower prices, and the market is not brisk. Yet, in spite of these survivals, the greatest fact and the greatest encouragement of the new year is the evidence that the light is breaking upon the dawn of a new era in human life, an era in which life and human values shall not be condemned and despised, [but] honored, loved and cherished. The demand is made upon us to recognize this great and extraordinary achievement of humanity.

But you say, "Do not the facts of life point in just the other direction? When have we ever witnessed so many discouraging evidences of degeneration as we have in the last year? Crime has been rampant," you say. "Great cesspools of corruption have been opened up. Immorality and licentiousness are increasing.

Divorces have never been more frequent, and [the] causes for the same never more discouraging and tragic." I could relate to you fact after fact to prove beyond the venture of a doubt that we are becoming worse and worse each year. But all that is part and parcel of the change. Corruption? Yes, but no one ever wastes money for purposes of corruption unless he sees his grip slipping away from that which he would hold. The era of corruption is the last desperate attempt of privilege to hold its control. The divorce evil is the witness to the growth of a higher conception of family life. It is a period of fermentation, and all the impurities rise to the surface as the process of change goes on beneath. He, who understands what is happening beneath the surface has no fear for the scum that floats to the top. Soon we shall skim that off.

This brings us to the second great demand of the new year, the demand of knowledge, the demand for deep, faithful, sympathetic insight into the signs of the times. To the primitive Christian, with his heart fixed on the one idea of the divine intervention, and the coming of the Kingdom of God down out of heaven and the return of the messiah, knowledge, real knowledge of reality, and [its] conditions was altogether superfluous. Enthusiasm was his strong point. He was wildly enthusiastic. Like the famous beanstalk of Jack, it grew by leaps and bounds, and he became lost in the region bordering on temporary insanity. We want enthusiasm, but first we want knowledge. We want to know, to understand. We need to face the conditions under which we live, for in those very conditions are the forces which shall emancipate us. In education is the safety of the republic. In education, not conventional education, but real knowledge of the great developing forces of our times, is the safety of humanity, and the preservation of human values. Any attempt to check the spirit of free inquiry in yourself or in another is the most dangerous, destructive thing that can happen. It bespeaks fear, and fear, as Emerson points out, is the carrion that hovers about prophesying revolution.² Above all else the demand for the

² Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) founder of American transcendentalism. This reference is to his essay "Compensation" where he writes, "All the old abuses in society, universal and particular, all unjust accumulations of property, and power, are avenged in the same manner. Fear is an instructor of great sagacity, and the herald of all revolutions. One thing he teaches, that there is rottenness where he appears. He is a

new year is that of knowledge, knowledge of human life in all its deeper impulses, a knowledge of social conditions, and knowledge of yourself. This is the demand that we make of each other for the common interests.

The third demand of the new year is the demand of devotion to the holiest and best things of life. What are those? you ask. That which reaches us the deepest, and at the same time establishes the best and closest feelings with our fellow beings, that is the holiest and best in life. More than that, the thought, the life that we feel, to be in touch with the great undercurrent of the world process, that is holiest and best. Will to be the servant of humanity. The values which we feel in our heart of hearts, we cherish, and which we wish for those whom we love best, let us work for those values, not for ourselves alone, and our friends, but for all the world. The values of the home, all its sacred associations, all its infinite possibilities, all its binding ties, its love, let those come first, not as things to [be] grabbed for ourselves, but as standards for all homes. Let it be a demand upon us that the ideal which we cherish as a home ideal shall become the ideal of all humanity.

Let it be a demand upon us that the wholesome, honest clean pleasures, that we enjoy shall overcome and drive [out] the low vicious, brutal pleasures that degrade mankind. Let it be a demand upon us that the privileges that we enjoy, the opportunities that are ours through no particular effort of our own, shall be universalized. Here we come upon the tragedy of life. The false values, the false conditions which the false values have helped to create, are demanding a tremendous toll from human life today. Grinding poverty, unrequited toil, fierce hopeless struggle for bread, leave little or no opportunity for those other things that should precede out of the mouth of God in human life. One of the great truths that the present time is teaching us, that we cannot, must not, permit the other man to

carrion crow, and through you see not well what he hovers for, there is death somewhere. Our property is timid, our laws are timid, our cultivated classes are timid. Fear for ages has boded and mowed and gibbered over government and property. That obscene bird is not there for nothing. He indicates great wrongs which must be revised." In *Essays: First Series*, Boston: Phillips, Sampson & Co., 1852, p. 100.

carry our burdens for us. If he does carry ours, we must carry his. The man, who is staggering under an overload is a reproach, while the man who carries no load is a disgrace, and he who is carried is a degenerate. Let this demand of the new year press itself home upon us. Let us remember those that are in bonds as bound with them, and let us bear one another's burdens. Let the life that we know, in us, in those we love, and in the stranger without the wall, be sacred and be made as valuable as possible. Not only let every man have a chance, but give him a chance. Each for all and all for each. Devotion to the attainment of these values is the demand of the new year and all years, until the ideal has been attained and humanity has won its freedom.

Last, but not least, is the demand of duty. We see these things, but we do them not. The impulse of the moment carries away. The momentary gratification destroys our life and another. The momentary dishonesty overrides the momentary obstacle, and gives us a temporary advantage. Hence, we let the moment rule the life, whereas the life should rule the moment, or rather all life should rule the moment. How far then should duty carry us in the work of making the reality of life conform to our ideals? It should carry us to the limit of our capacity. That talent which we have should be used. We cannot do more, and we must not do less. If we have the capacity of doing more than other men can do, or doing something that others cannot do, that, by all the laws of life, is our duty. More than all other reasons I believe why so many are unhappy, disconsolate, in the face of the opportunities of life is because they have hidden their talent in the ground. Those whose talent has been buried by conditions are often unhappy, but their unhappiness, their blasted hopes do not compare with the despair of those who have buried their talents in the face of opportunity. So, the demand of duty is based on opportunity and capacity. In the fulfillment of this demand is life and peace and happiness for all the world. The greater the capacity, the greater the task, and the more binding the duty. In our times we need to stimulate our sense of duty. Not for a reward, but as the fulfillment of a trust, is life lived morally. We live to bear witness to the truth. That which we do today is bound to influence mankind through all generations. Three hundred years ago, the settlers of the south, shirking the duty of labor, brought into the southern states African slaves. The south has inherited the negro problem, and will have to grapple with it for generations yet to come. We cannot isolate our life, or one single act of it

from the rest. There is no absolutism. The demand of the new year is to administer your capacity as a trust. It is not for sale. I know that the pressure of the times makes it difficult to be true to the trust. I know that the conventional standards tell you to sell out, to speak, to write, to labor, or think for the sole purpose of turning your power into cash. But in the deeper undercurrents of the time, mankind has always scoffed at the man who sold his body, his mind, his soul for cash. There is a ready market for such goods, and the pressure of conditions are hard, but the price can never equal the value of the goods. Duty, yes, I believe each person has a duty to perform, and that the wellbeing of mankind through all the ages depends upon the faithfulness and fidelity with which each performs that duty. We are the channels, the agents, through which the spirit of the living God works and will work. If we short-circuit the current of life by failure, by betrayal of trust, if we sell out, there is trouble. This is the great sacred demand of the new year, the demand of duty, of trustworthiness.

How far then do you see into the heart of the new era, how far then do you understand its deeper motives and values, how far then are you devoted to them? How far then do you follow their lead in fulfilling your trust? How far do you really honor life and humanity, and how far do you respect your own integrity? Let the new year answer, as the old year does answer, by the impartial logic of its unfolding mystery. But—the wellbeing of hundreds rests on your answer, as it is given in life.