

Our Weekly Sermons

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THE FAITHFUL WORKER.

An Ordination Sermon.

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II Timothy ii, 15: "A workman that needeth not to be ashamed."

A workman! Such was the man by whom these words were written, a true laborer in the vine yard of Christ, one who had no need to be ashamed of his work; for it was his boast when his adversaries sought to place him below the other apostles in authority, that he "labored more abundantly than they all;" that he was "in labors more abundant."

Such, too, was St. Paul's Master and ours, a worker with hand and heart, with mind and will, one whose very life was the outcome of the thought; "I must work the work of Him that sent me," "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent me, and to finish his work."

Such was the manifest destiny of mankind from the day of his creation, the significance of which has been made plainer through all his subsequent history. At first it was to dress the garden and keep it. Sin made labor less sweet, more oppressive. Man had to eat his bread in the sweat of his face. But work was ever the condition of advancement and progress, as well as the means of providing for the supply of all our wants.

All work is honorable, which is lawful and useful. No such work can ever be degrading or unworthy, although our ignorance, our sloth, or our pride, may tempt us to such a thought. But there are, undoubtedly, some kinds of work which involve a higher kind of responsibility than others and which demand the possession of peculiar powers and capabilities. The making of laws for the people, the administration of justice, the government of the state; these are kinds of work which may tax the highest powers and energies of man. But there is no work higher in its aims, more solemn and responsible in its doing, involving more tremendous issues than the work of the minister of Christ. And therefore there can be no more solemn event transacted on earth than the consecration of men to this great and glorious and awful life and work the ordination to the diaconate and priesthood in the Church of God.

What is the work of such, and how are they to accomplish it? These are the questions which I will now attempt humbly and earnestly to answer, remembering that for this also—for our speaking and hearing—we must give account,

I. WHAT IS OUR WORK AS MINISTERS OF CHRIST?

Happily, we have no longer to protest against mere mercenary views of the work of the ministry. We need hardly warn men that this sacred office is not merely one out of many that might be chosen as a means of making a living. Doubtless it is still possible for men to offer themselves as candidates for ordination from motives which are not the highest or the best; but that man must know little of the circumstances of Canadian life who looks upon the ministry as the way to living luxuriously or abundantly.

Yet it is necessary that we should form to ourselves a clear and definite notion of the office which we seek and of the work which we have to do; and, first of all, that we should understand that we are called by God to this work, as we solemnly declare that we believe we are, before we receive the gift of orders. And by this we do not mean, of course, that we must look for any miraculous intervention of a providential or internal character. Doubtless calls of this kind have been given by God to man; but this is not His ordinary way and method.

What, however, is requisite that every sincere candidate for the ministry should possess, and should satisfy himself that he does possess, must be a real and deep interest in the work which he is undertaking, a certain measure of fitness for the duties required of him, and a willingness and readiness to consecrate himself, his whole life, and all his powers to the fulfilment of the responsibilities which he is assuming. A man who is not conscious of such convictions and purposes is not only false to his professions and to his God; he is wronging his own soul and bringing desolation into his own heart and life. But more of this when we come to speak of the doing of the work. We must now say a few words on the nature of the work itself; and a few words must suffice.

1. And, of course, the great and all-comprehending work of the Christian minister is "to make God known to men. The disciples of Christ were commanded to preach the Gospel to every creature. And, the Gospel, the good news which they had to proclaim, was the assurance that they had a Father in Heaven who loved them; who, although they had sinned, was not willing that they should perish; who had manifested Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ; who had sent that Son to die that they might live; to rise that they might be lifted up into fellowship with God. I say this is the foundation, in a sense the whole, of the work which we have to do for God and for man.

Men need the knowledge of God. We are by nature ignorant and hostile. It is difficult to make a man believe that God is good and yet righteous, just and yet merciful. It is most of all difficult to make them understand that these attributes are inseparable. Yet these convictions will be wrought by the manifestation of Jesus Christ, by letting men know and understand what He was, and how God was in Him.

2. And then, as inseparable from the making known of God to men, there must be "the drawing of men to God" through Jesus Christ; for this is the very end of the Divine manifestation. "I,

if I be lifted up," said Christ, "will draw all men to Me." And this is not only the legitimate effect of the setting forth of the love of God in Christ, but it is the very end for which the work of redemption was undertaken; and if this end is not attained, then for those who fail to find the Father in the Son, the grace of God has been in vain. Here, then, is a test of the success of our work. If we are "wise to win souls," we shall have our reward in seeing men drawn to God through Christ and testifying to the power of Divine grace by walking before God in newness of life.

3. And then we must remember that our work is not merely a work for individuals, but for the Church at large, for the diocese, for the parish. It is true that every man must be personally drawn to God. Each one must repent for himself, and believe and love and obey for himself. No man can do another man's work. This is an affair between the soul and God. But although the life of God in the soul of man is an individual life, it is not a separate, isolated life; it is a life lived in communion with God and with His people. The aim of all revelation, of all Divine speaking and working among men is the establishment of the Kingdom of God in its fullness. When God's Kingdom is fully come, then will all His people participate in its fullness. And this is an end for which we must be laboring and which we must ever endeavor to realize in our measure and degree. Every parish in which peace and unity and love prevail is a foreshadowing of that Kingdom which is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, and any worker for Christ will understand that he can truly serve the real interests of individual souls only as he helps to their being knit together in one communion and fellowship.

Some of these things we shall perhaps understand better when we consider our second point:—

II. HOW THIS WORK IS TO BE DONE.

How shall we set about it? On what principles shall we proceed so that we may hope to be able to look back upon our life when we come to the end of it and feel that we have not labored in vain?

Let us pause upon this for a moment. Some of us are now on the very threshold of the sanctuary. Time is short, and the end will soon be here. We shall then be preparing to give an account of the work which we have done; and we shall do it with joy or with grief. Doubtless there will always be disappointments and failures and sorrows—failures in ourselves and in others. Yet this need not be the character of our work at large and in general. Even those who are conscious of many faults and failures may yet be able, in reviewing the past, to feel that they have been true in heart and in purpose; that they have not been unfaithful, that they have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God; that they have not spared themselves in doing their work.

How shall we set about the doing of our work so that we may hope without presumption that it shall have some such accomplishment and end? This is the question we must now try to answer.

1. And first of all, it must be laid down as of absolute necessity that the teacher should believe what he has to say—that the preacher should have faith in his own message. One might perhaps assume a qualification so obvious. And perhaps we may venture to say confidently that very few men indeed can be found among our clergy who would subscribe documents which they do not believe.

Yet, on the other hand, may there not sometimes be too great easiness of assent to doctrines which have been too lightly considered, or even a disposition to give meanings too elastic to the contents of our formularies? The Church of which we are members has allowed a wise liberty to her children and her teachers. Various schools of thought live and work within her borders, each claiming the right to its position. But there must be limits to these varieties; and at least the man who does not accept in their natural and historic meaning the statements of the great creeds, can have no right to occupy the place of teacher in the communion which places these statements at the foundation of her faith and theology. There are cases in which the warning here offered has been unheeded, and the effects have been most serious in regard to their own faith. God forbid that so elementary a requirement should be lacking in those who now present themselves for ordination!

2. Hardly less necessary than this simple honesty and veracity which will utter no message which it does not believe to be true and valid, is that personal faith which accepts for itself the blessings which it proclaims for others. It is quite true that God has sometimes made ungodly men to be a means of blessing to others. God in His mercy blesses His own truth, even when the bearer of the truth is untouched by its power. But how awful the reflection that he who speaks the words of life should himself be abiding in death; that he who is bidding men to be reconciled to God should himself be without God in the world.

What a danger to the Church! We are often reminded of the evils which result from the imperfections and inconsistencies of professing Christians by Christian ministers. But what are inconsistencies, even the worst of them, to the blackness of the darkness in the heart of one who professes to bear aloft the torch of truth and guide men to the light of the world. We expect inconsistencies in men; but we do not expect unreality, hypocrisy.

Let us then make quite sure that in preparing to bring others to Christ we have first brought ourselves, so that when we stand up before our fellowmen we may speak to them of that which we have seen and felt and which our hands have handled; we may speak out of the fullness of our hearts experience, with a power which can arise from personal conviction and realization alone.

3. And then, once more, there is a demand for the absolute consecration of ourselves—our heart, our life—our body and soul—all that we are and all that we have—to this most blessed and glorious service.

This may seem a tremendous demand, and yet it is clearly involved in our position and relation as Christians and as servants of Jesus Christ. What is the elementary fact as to the Christian's relations to God? "Ye are not your own, for ye are bought with a price." We are not our own, and therefore we have no control over any of our parts or powers, apart from the requirements of the law and spirit of God.

And our Lord distinctly tells us not only that we belong to God altogether, that we are called to be perfect as our Father, but also that a divided heart and will, is a rational impossibility. No man can serve two masters. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

There is no error against which all of us—priests and people—more need to be put upon our guard than the notion that it would be better for us if God would relax some of His requirements. Nothing could be worse for us. It would be the sure introduction of discord into our inner man. It would render harmony and unity forever impossible.

God's commandments are not grievous. They are but the expression of His own being. They tell us to be like God, like our Father in whose image we were made; and the true blessedness of human life consists in our recognizing the rightness and goodness of His demands.

Let us then clearly understand that there can be no real peace or power for the Christian man—and least of all for the Christian minister—who does not begin his work with the purpose of full and entire consecration of himself to God in Christ Jesus. Let this, then, my brethren, be your watchword this day—All for Jesus, all for God, I am not my own, and I will claim no part of myself for myself. I will annihilate myself that Christ may be formed in me. I will die that Christ may live. I will have only one purpose in life, the purpose expressed in the question and prayer: "Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" As for me, I desire only to spend and be spent in Thy service.

These are awful words to repeat—awful resolves to form; and yet, no others are lawful for us.

Let us try to understand somewhat more fully what is involved in such purposes. We shall all agree that mere generalities are unmeaning and even dangerous, and we acknowledge the wisdom of the counsel which bids us count the cost of any enterprise we are taking in hand.

Now, a life of consecration to the service of God, such as has been described, involves being emptied of self—that is of pride, self-righteousness, self-sufficiency, self-pleasing and self-indulgence, and the frank and absolute submission of all our powers to the will and spirit of God. It therefore involves the sacrifice of pride, sloth, temper, and every habit which interferes with absolute devotion to the work of God.

These are serious thoughts. A great writer on ethics has declared that all moral evils spring from conceit and sloth, and certainly our ministerial failures may in most cases be traced to these causes. Of course, the great defect in every character is the absence of love; but this, again, is closely connected with the selfishness which is the parent of conceit.

A recent writer declares, in writing on the charity which is not easily provoked, that the exhibition of bad temper on the part of professing Christians has been a greater hindrance to the progress of true religion than many faults of character that were in themselves more serious; and it is notorious that many clergymen have almost entirely neutralized their influence for good by failing to control their tempers.

We have often heard of the importance of what is called tact in the administration of affairs and in dealing with men; whilst some have spoken with contempt of a faculty which seemed of the earth, earthly. It may be true enough that there is a kind of worldly tact which is far from lovely, which does not savor of Christ. But there is a better kind, that fine touch—for this is the meaning of tact—which grasps without wounding, which is sensitive to the feelings and wishes of all around. This gentle Christian tact—what is it but the outcome of personal humility, kindness and consideration for others? Where these are present, that will not be wanting.

Let us clearly understand, dear brethren, that unless our consecration of ourselves means such things as these, it means nothing. You who are going forward to the ministry of the Church are engaging in work in which you will meet with many trials, many failures, many disappointments in yourselves and others. Doubtless you will have your encouragements and successes, and these may to some of you be more dangerous than your failures. You will have to work among men many of whom will be unreasonable and impatient, and some of whom will be indulgent. Here, too, are dangers of different kinds. How shall we meet them? There is but one answer. "Be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might."

"Who is sufficient for these things?" Not man, but God. "Our sufficiency is of God." You have a glorious example in your work. Contemplate the life and mind of Jesus Christ. Let that mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus—a mind of love and lowliness and self-denying labor. Here is the secret of all spiritual power, of all real work done by God.

It is not by learning or by intellectual ability that the work of God is done, although these need not be despised or undervalued. Every gift of God should be used for His glory; and the faithful minister will neglect no means of acquiring the knowledge which will enable him to be a teacher of others. On this point it is not necessary at this moment to enlarge. You have been training in the schools, and your college work will be only the beginning of studies to be carried on so long as life endures. But the real power in the ministry must always be the grace of God.

Learn then to love God and to love man. Go forth among your fellow-men and speak to them and walk among them as one who