

SELF-IMPROVEMENT FOR SABBATH SCHOOL TEACHERS.*

BY REV. GEO. BRUCE, B.A., PASTOR, ST. DAVID'S CHURCH, ST. JOHN, N.B.

WE often speak of a self-made man. By this we mean a man who has become what he is by his own exertion, one who has attained to some position and success with little assistance, one who has been his own helper. Something of this kind is the subject before us to-day, the man or woman being a Sabbath school teacher or being considered as a Sabbath school teacher, rather than in a business or professional capacity, and the place the Sabbath school instead of the workshop, the office or the lecture-room.

Speaking generally, there are

THREE ELEMENTS.

which enter into the composition of every life. (1) The man himself. (2) The influences which affect him. (3) The results of his own energy. The first comprises the natural ability of mind and body with which the man is endowed. The second consists of the helps or hindrances which he receives from persons or things about him, commonly known as his environment. The third is the measure of success which attends his own efforts or energy. Not one of these can ever be absent from any life. They vary greatly in their relative proportions in different men; but, in no case can any one of them be entirely wanting.

We all have the capital of mental and bodily power with which we begin life. In every case there is a certain amount of training and instruction given by others, and in every instance much depends upon the efforts which a man puts forth to avail himself of the means within his reach to help himself. So we see the distinction between help received and self-help is not along a clear line. No man is entirely self-made, and no man can become anything without exerting himself.

Owing to circumstances, the proportions of these two elements vary exceedingly in different lives. In the case of one, teachers are provided. He is sent to school before his own will is consulted; his course whilst he is still under the guidance of others, is directed in furtherance of his education by the training and instruction of professors. Here the support, guidance, instruction and training from without preponderate greatly. Another receives little help, his opportunities and advantages are insignificant, or in place of them he meets with difficulties and discouragements, and in proportion as the advantages are wanting and success is attained by the individual energy and effort of the man, he is called a self-made man.

The application of this to our subject is obvious. The Sabbath school teacher must, in general, be very largely self-taught, self-trained. It is true that the means for training teachers are vastly improved. It is not long since

THE SOLE EQUIPMENT

of a Sabbath school teacher consisted of the three prime requisites—Christian character, home training, and a Bible.

Now, although these still lie and ever will lie at the foundation, there have been added to them, Teachers' Meetings, Classes for the instruction and help of teachers, and Special Systems or Institutions almost taking rank as colleges, along with Lesson Helps of various degrees of excellence, so numerous as to remind us of the admonition of the king: "Listen to the words of the wise, and to remember that of making books there is no end. And yet, owing to causes inseparable from the nature of the work and the circumstances in which it is accomplished, the majority of teachers must, under God, ever be to a great extent, dependent upon their own exertions for their ability and success.

Few teachers have the time or the opportunities for taking advantage of the special instruction which is provided in large cities and at the places where arrangements are made for the purpose. They are therefore compelled to depend very largely upon their own resources and to help themselves as well as they can in the use of the means which may fall within their reach, and develop their own methods of instruction and persuasion. In other callings it is the rule that, along with a general education, special instruction is given and training secured for the work which the student is to follow. It is so in the mechanical branches. It is so in the professions of Law, Medicine and Theology. It is so in business. The teachers in our common schools are trained with the greatest care and fitted for the responsible positions, which as instructors of the rising generation, they are looking forward to fill. The Sabbath school teacher on the contrary, although he is now entrusted with almost the entire responsibility of imparting a knowledge of God's Word, and of the great realities of life and eternity, and of doing this in the space of half-an-hour a week, and in the face of innumerable counter influences, with very little help or encouragement and no remuneration, is expected to do this with very little previous preparation. At the request of the superintendent or minister, or under the leading of his own convictions he is at once summoned into the presence of a class which he is expected to interest and teach in the most important matters which can occupy their attention.

It is quite evident, therefore, how important the subject of

SELF-HELP

must be under these circumstances. If the teacher is to succeed, if he is to render a good account of himself and his class, he must develop almost unaided and in contact with the actual work the qualities which are necessary to enable him to study, to teach, to interest, to control, to influence the boys and girls committed to his care. We need not wonder, then, that there is difficulty. We need not wonder that some fail, that many achieve but indifferent success.

In bringing this subject before you, I would first notice

SEVERAL ENCOURAGING THINGS

which appear from an examination of the lives of men in other fields.

In the first place, we are struck by the number of men who have attained distinction under similar circumstances in every sphere of activity. The names of men distinguished in this way are so numerous and so familiar that the mention of individuals is almost out of place. Indeed the firmament would be despoiled of a multitude of its most glorious luminaries if those were removed who toiled upwards from obscure homes by the diligent and untiring use of slender opportunities.—John Bunyan mending tinware on the streets of Bedford, Hugh Miller with his stone hammer in the quarry, Sir Humphry Davy learning chemistry as an

apothecary's apprentice, William Carey drinking in the inspiration which made him the peerless leader of

MODERN FOREIGN MISSIONARIES

on the cobbler's bench, Dr. Livingstone going from the weaver's loom to unravel the mysteries of Africa with the heroism of a martyr. But, it would be impossible to enumerate the names of those who have laid the world under tribute, who found their preparation not in schools or colleges, but in the performance of the ordinary duties of some familiar occupation.

A second fact worthy of note in this connection, is that those who have received the fullest preparation and help have not attained to success by means of this help so much as by their own

SELF-RELIANCE AND ENERGY.

No college ever made a successful man, and it is wonderful how difficulties on the one hand and advantages on the other sink into comparative insignificance when men gird themselves for the battle of life. It will not be understood from this that I would hold in low esteem any means of instructing teachers or of giving them systematic training in the best methods of teaching. I am strongly of the opinion that nothing calls more urgently for our best efforts than the providing of such help and training. I believe it is scarcely possible to over-estimate the importance of a teacher's work and influence, and if it is deemed a matter of importance that the teachers of day schools should be duly qualified; if it is necessary that he who cuts a garment, or prepares your food, or builds your house, shall know how to do his work; much more could we see the soul and its eternal home, as well as its present usefulness, we should feel the importance of instructing those who are entrusted with these highest of all interests. Still, in the absence of such instruction, and in view of the yet greater importance to be attached to the efforts put forth by the teacher to improve himself, it is well that we should form a just estimate of the value of such efforts after self-improvement. It is, therefore, no disparagement to schools or systematic instruction to say what I would emphatically say, that no training of any school ever did make or ever will make a successful teacher, without earnest, continuous, prayerful effort on the part of the teacher himself to prepare himself for his work; and on the other hand, that no one who is desirous to serve Christ in feeding His lambs, need despair of success by means of the same earnest preparation, no matter how imperfect his original training may have been. Let me, therefore, point out a few things concerning this most important matter of self-help, and how it may be accomplished.

IN THE FIRST PLACE I WOULD SAY THAT

FAITHFUL TEACHING

is the best means of self-improvement. By doing your very best with the lesson of to-day you are surely fitting yourself for doing better with the lesson of to-morrow. This, the readiest, the surest, the quickest means of self-improvement, is within the reach of every teacher. To teach well, one

MUST HAVE KNOWLEDGE.

And there is no way by which knowledge can be so completely made your own as by preparing yourself to communicate it to others. Men sometimes think they have clear ideas although they cannot express them. However this may be, one thing we may be quite assured of, namely, that no man can convey an idea clearly to another without first making it thoroughly his own. There is perhaps no better mental discipline than the acquisition of knowledge under these conditions. And the exercise is most blessed when the subject of study is the highest and noblest possible to the mind of man. There is no other means like this when one seeks humbly to acquaint himself with Divine Truth that he may make it known to others. In no other way, I venture to think, can the mind become so fully conscious of the love of God to man and of the wondrous adaptation of His truth to human need and human sin. In no other way can the mind bring itself more completely into sympathy with the mind of God. It is told of

KEPLER, THE CELEBRATED ASTRONOMER,

that when, after immense and protracted labours he succeeded in calculating the course of the planets, he was almost overcome in an ecstasy of delight. Again and again he had made the attempt, only to find that the actual course of the star as he followed it with his telescope diverged slowly but surely from that traced by his pen upon the page, showing error somewhere in his knowledge or his calculation. Discouraged, but undismayed, he returned to review the enormous labour, examining anew each step, however plain, every detail, however minute. At last, as he tells in thrilling language, in the dead of night, alone, in silence, his work once more complete, he turned his telescope to the heavens with breathless anxiety, and traced the motion of the planet hour by hour. He found that the curve upon the page coincided with that of the star in the heavens. At last he had solved the problem, and, in a transport of emotion he exclaimed aloud, "I am thinking the thoughts of God." Is any one surprised at his emotion? He had made a great discovery. He had analyzed the forces employed in producing the motion of the planet, but he had done more—he had brought his mind into harmony with the mind of Him who had created the star and balanced these forces. As he expressed it in the almost inspired words which broke the silence of the midnight hour, he was thinking the thoughts of God.

Sublime as the conception is, there is something more sublime still. And something which is open to us all. We may not be, we are not astronomers, but in the path which leads from the star of Bethlehem to Calvary there is a greater wonder than any written upon the heavens by the finger of creative power.

And where shall we learn to think these wondrous thoughts of God, thoughts of love and salvation, there but in His Word? And this, like the starry sky, is open to us all. The astronomer needs his telescope and his genius for the one, the teacher has the promise of God's Spirit to teach him to understand the other. Let none of us then say of this that it is beyond his reach. Strive so to make that word your own, so to know the thoughts of God that you can make them known to others, and you have at your command the best of all means of self-improvement as a Sabbath school teacher. The best teacher will be the best student of the Bible. Faithful preparation for to-day makes you stronger and richer for the preparation of to-morrow.

ANOTHER MEANS OF SELF-IMPROVEMENT

lies open to the teacher in the study of the minds and dispositions of his scholars. A desire to lead them to Christ will more than anything else give you sympathy with them and consequent power over them. Here is another book placed within

the reach of every teacher, and he who is the most diligent in his efforts to learn here will be most successful in his efforts to teach. A teacher need not be surprised to find his scholars inattentive to the lessons which he would teach them if he with his years and experience is careless to learn the lessons which God has placed before him. In the character, the disposition, the life of his scholars, the teacher has a means of self-help to becoming a wiser man and a better teacher, second in value only to the Word of God.

You may study Metaphysics and Mental Philosophy if you please, but you will find no book on the mind, ever written by man, like the mind itself. It is an open book, no stereotyped page, but a living, changeable, encouraging, perplexing, mysterious reality. Each scholar in the class, moreover, has his own individuality. No two are alike. You may have Peter and John and Thomas sitting side by side in your class, with dispositions as different as were those of the disciples. Where shall you look for help in this? Who shall tell you? You may read or hear the experience of others, but how shall you discriminate? You must

KNOW YOUR SCHOLARS FIRST.

And in this you can get no help. It will cost you anxious thought. You will have to apply your mind to it, to put yourself about to gain your end. But assuredly you will have your reward not merely in your success with your class but in the growth of your own earnestness and power as a teacher. Very closely allied to this is the discipline which one receives in trying to win these diverse spirits, and bring them to the Saviour. The Bible says: "He that ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city." And assuredly one who will subdue and govern must first learn to govern himself. Now the very trials incident to a teacher's work are most potent helps to this, or more correctly, perhaps, they afford most excellent opportunities for learning self-control, patience, perseverance, faith, hope, for the best of all reasons that your weakness is at once discovered to you, and opportunity is afforded for self-discipline in the exercise, not of the more robust features of your moral being, but of the things which you would fain conceal from yourself and your friends.

How often you go home weary and discouraged, wishing you knew how to learn to do this work or that some one else would take the class. "Never fear, God is teaching you. Try to learn the lesson. The old prophets had a 'burden' when they received a message from God; so will you think of your scholars. Pray for them. Study their characters that you may so teach as to win them. In doing this you will become more interested in them. You will seek them out in their homes, and, if you can, you will have them come to yours. Be encouraged, you will not fail!

There remains another means of self-improvement open to every teacher who is willing to use it. I mean the faculty of finding and using

APT ILLUSTRATIONS.

Nature is full of them. Our Saviour used this method more than any other teacher. He scarcely spoke without making reference to some familiar thing which threw a flood of light upon the subject. We are told in one place that without a parable spoke He not unto them. The bird, the lily, the fishing-net, the mustard seed, the sheep fold, the vine, and many other things presented themselves to Him as means of teaching. And nearly all successful teachers have this faculty in some degree. Without this, teaching often becomes wearisome. As if one should seek to train a vine without a trellis, the thoughts try in vain to sustain themselves in the air. You call in the aid of some familiar thing, and instantly the mind lays hold upon it with a sense of relief; it grasps your meaning. If a teacher will increase his usefulness and power let him learn to see illustrations; at least, let him look for them. The more familiar the better, from the ordinary daily scenes of the lives of the scholars. Books of anecdotes and illustrations are well enough, but as an exercise for self-education in the power of observation nothing is like the things which come under one's own observation. There is an affinity between them and the truth which you wish to teach which seems to bring them together in a natural way.

"HELPS."

so called? Is there not a place for them? Assuredly but not in any case can any of them help those who do not help themselves by persevering, earnest diligence. Notes and Lesson Leaves will never make a teacher any more than hammers and saws and chisels and planes will make a mechanic. Still, to the teacher who is putting forth earnest effort there are helps to self-help which are exceedingly valuable. A good Concordance is, of course, indispensable. Every teacher must have that and use it. A Bible Atlas and Bible Dictionary are also to be counted among the essential requisites. After these it would of course be quite out of place for me to attempt to name the papers and schemes and books which are worthy of honourable mention. For example, "Self Help," by Samuel Smiles, though not written with reference to Sabbath School work, would be an admirable book to read for stimulus and encouragement. Dr. Vincent, and Mr. and Mrs. Crofts and others, publish excellent hints and instructions. And one especially I would mention, "Teaching and Teachers," by H. C. Trumbull, in which the various elements of teaching are set forth in a most interesting manner. The book is eminently practical, being something like the essence of a life experience. Any worker who reads this book carefully will be amply repaid. He will have new thoughts about what teaching is and how to teach.

In conclusion, briefly stated, the sum of what I have said is this: Self-help is not so much a question of how to get something which we do not possess, as one of learning to use the means we have. Without this prayerful, self-sacrificing, continuous labour no outside help, however voluminous or attractive, can make a successful teacher. With this spirit the slenderest opportunities may be sufficient for excellent service. And he who faithfully consecrates himself to his work shall find that by God's blessing he has been enabled to attain good results, and at the same time that he has become a stronger, a wiser, and a better man. In his self-forgetful efforts to lead others to Christ he has come to know more of Christ himself. In seeking to save others he has most fully been working out, almost unconsciously, his own salvation.

And when the day of work is over, and the Master shall say, "Call the labourers," he shall assuredly hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

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Sabbath School Work.

LESSON HELPS.

FOURTH QUARTER.

PETER RESTORED.

LESSON VII., November 14th, John xxi. 4-19. memorise verses 15-17.

GOLDEN TEXT.—He saith unto him, Feed my Lambs.—John xxi. 15.

TIME.—Soon after April 16, A.D. 30.

PLACE.—The northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum, or Bethsaida.

INTRODUCTION.—Not long after the last lesson the eleven disciples went into Galilee (Matt. xxviii. 16), as the Lord had sent word to them through the angel's message by the women (Matt. xxviii. 7) While waiting for the appointed time, seven of them go a fishing in the Sea of Galilee, as they used to years before. They plied their nets all night, but caught nothing.

HELPS OVER HARD PLACES.—I. Knew not that it was Jesus: (1) the light was dim, it being at daybreak; (2) they did not expect him there. 5. Meat: food to go with bread, usually fish. 7. Disciple whom Jesus loved. John. Naked: having on only his undergarment. Cast himself into the sea: to swim quickly to the shore. 8. Two hundred cubits: 300 to 350 feet. 11. Simon Peter went up into the boat. 12. Dine: Breakfast. 14. Third time: to the disciples in a body, when John was present. It was the seventh, including those to individuals. 15. More than these: than these other disciples love me. In the first two questions, Jesus uses a word for love, meaning a thoughtful, reverential affection, involving choice, the word always used in speaking of our love to God. In all His answers, Peter uses another word, expressing a more emotional, instinctive, personal love. He knew he felt this love. In the third question, Jesus uses Peter's word. Feed my lambs: the children, the youth of the Church. 16. Feed: rather shepherd, a different word from the others, translated feed. It means not only feed, but watch over, care for. 17. Third time: to remind Peter of his three denials, and the perfect forgiveness implied in trusting his sheep to his care. 19. Signifying by what death: crucifixion.

SUBJECTS FOR SPECIAL REPORTS.—The visit to Galilee.—The night of toil without Jesus.—The success in obedience to Jesus' word.—Pastors and teachers as shepherds of men.—The assurance of love.—Love to Jesus and work for him.—Pastors and teachers as shepherds.

QUESTIONS.

INTRODUCTORY.—Where were the disciples in our last lesson? Where did they go soon after? (v. 1; Matt. xxviii. 16) Why did they go there? (Matt. xxviii. 7) How many went to Galilee? What did some of them do while they were waiting? (vs. 2, 3.)

SUBJECT: TWO KINDS OF WORK FOR JESUS.

I. FIRST KIND OF WORK TYPIFIED BY FISHERMEN (vs. 4-14).—How many went a-fishing? How long did they toil in vain? Who met them in the morning? Why did they not know who it was? What advice did he give them? What was their success? How did this cause them to know who he was? What similar experience had they had three years before? (Luko v. 1-11.) What did Peter do? Why? What did Jesus do when they came ashore? What did Jesus mean to teach them by this incident? In what respects was their work like that of a fisherman? What lessons can you learn from fishers, as to bringing men to Jesus? What could the disciples learn from their toiling all night in vain without Jesus? What by their success in obedience to his word? When was this fulfilled to them? (Acts I. 4; II. 41.)

II. SECOND KIND OF WORK TYPIFIED BY SHEPHERDS (vs. 15-19).—What question did Jesus ask Peter? How many times did he ask it? Why? What was Peter's reply? What three commands did Jesus lay upon Peter? Who are meant by lambs here? By sheep? What is it to feed them? Why are lambs mentioned first? Can those who love Jesus best work for him? Will working for him increase our love? What other things must a shepherd do for his flock besides feeding them? How may you know whether you belong to Jesus' flock? Why were these things said to Peter rather than to the others? Why does Jesus call him Simon and not Peter? How would this questioning comfort and help Peter? Was he a different man ever after this? How was he to follow Jesus?

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS.

I. Jesus often comes to us while performing our daily duties.

II. The Christian is to be like a fisherman, in that (1) he is to catch men; (2) he must go to them in order to gain them; (3) he must attract rather than drive; (4) he must use instrumentalities adapted to his purpose; (5) he must be patient.

III. Labour for souls is vain without Jesus.

IV. Labour for souls is successful in obedience to Jesus' word.

V. Love to Jesus is the foundation of work for men's souls.

VI. The Christian is to be like a shepherd, in feeding, guiding, guarding the flock.

REVIEW EXERCISE.—10. Where did Jesus next appear to his disciples? 11. What did he tell them to do? 12. What was the result? 13. Of what was this to remind them? 14. What question did he ask Peter? 15. What did he bid him do? 16. Feed his lambs and his sheep.—Peterson.

*A paper read before the Provincial Sabbath School Association of New Brunswick. Revised for the PRESBYTERIAN REVIEW by the author.