

us by the Holy Ghost, and this only which can be a principle of goodness, and therefore of truth and righteousness and love and harmony in our life—we must yet remember that faith acts by our free agency, and moreover, that faith itself, which may perhaps be said to be the very root of character, is strengthened by every true and just and loving and self-denying action that a man performs.

We have spoken of original constitution, of early education, of divine aid. We must say something further on our own business in the work of forming ourselves, from the time when we more especially take this work into our own hands.

“The only things,” says Epictetus, “which are really in our own power are our actions.” Under actions we include thoughts allowed, words, deeds, prayers, sacred exercises of every kind, reading, study, and all conscious and voluntary intercourse with others. In the moral sense, all these are acts. Involuntary thoughts, sensations, emotions, and the like are only states. These we can control only indirectly. We are only indirectly responsible for them. They are rather the signs and the results of character, than stages in its formation. But every voluntary act which comes from a man is not only the outcome of his character: it is also a distinct contribution towards its formation.

This is a matter of the deepest importance. It is the one point in which we are responsible for the formation of our character, for the fashioning of our life, for the making of ourselves. Our nature, we repeat, such as it is was given us by God. We had nothing to do with it. God's grace is given to us freely; and only in so far as it is determined by our own actions have we any responsibility as to its nature. But for what we do, for what comes by our own effort or co-operation, we are strictly responsible.

No one can doubt that our acts do, as a matter of fact, form our character. It is a point on which it is unnecessary to insist. Every one knows that his habits are the results of his actions. When we have done a thing a great many times, we have acquired the habit of doing it; and the sum of our habits is our character. Men complain that they cannot come to faith. They think that, in some way, it is their misfortune. If they knew their own inner history well, they would understand that faith is no accidental quality, no gift arbitrarily bestowed. We may foster or quench the sense of the eternal, the invisible, the spiritual, the divine. Every word and deed, every thought and purpose has gone towards the clearing or the blinding of the Spiritual vision, towards the strengthening or enfeebling of the energy of the will.

It is clear then that *self-denial* must have a very important place in the formation of character; because it is the power of self denial or the lack of this power which determines most of our actions. Whether a man shall do what he likes, or shall do his duty; whether a man shall act on a momentary impulse or shall regulate his actions on a principle; this is the difference between a man who cannot or does not exercise self-denial and the man who can and does.

And this is the difference between a strong character and a weak. Self-denial in itself does not make a man good or bad. A man whose principles are utterly selfish and worldly may have great powers of self-denial. But, although it does not constitute the difference between a good character and a bad, it does make all the difference between a strong character and a weak. The man who cannot or does not deny himself shows that he is weak already; but he is making himself ever weaker and weaker.

Do we need to be told what is here