

# "THE SIN OF OVERWORK"

## INTRODUCTION

There is a story in the Old Testament about a man who had a prisoner entrusted to his charge and who was commanded above all else to guard that prisoner with his own life. For a while the man did just that - stood guard over the prisoner - did that and nothing else. But as the tide of battle moved in his direction, he thought he could do more by lending a hand with his sword. And so he leaped into the battle for several minutes. During these brief moments, the prisoner took to his heels and escaped. When his superior officers demanded an explanation all that the man could stammer out was, "As thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone"

## DEVELOPMENT

So often, in the battle of life, it is like that. Try to do two things at once and one of them may suffer. Try to do two things at once and the thing that suffers may be the thing of prior consequence to which you should be devoting yourself with undivided energy and attention. Many a business executive could probably tell you about able young men who fall down on the job because they do not concentrate on it; they have too many irons in the fire. People lose opportunities, not, as they sometimes complain, because opportunities never come their way, but because when the opportunities do come, they are not on hand to make the most of them. They are apt to be otherwise engaged, perhaps industriously engaged, but not on their real business. There was an old Puritan divine who wrote on the flyleaf of every book that came into his possession his name and under it: "Remember that thou art a Minister of the Word. Mind thy business".

Going back to the story that I began with - what I want to emphasize is this phrase: "As thy servant was busy here and there." It accurately describes the character and conveys the tempo and the atmosphere of modern living. Always on the move. Operating on a tight and crowded schedule, keeping an anxious eye on the clock, engaged in an unending duel with time - this is the life as millions of Americans know it. The pace is swifter, the pressure harder, and the amount of work to be done heavier than they have any right to be.

We talk about the sins of the body: gluttony and sensuality. We talk about the sins of the disposition: bad temper, faultfinding, hypocrisy. Perhaps it's time that something was said about the sin of overwork and since this is Labor Day weekend, this seems to be the time to do it. The sin of overwork. There are lots of people, of course, who never commit this sin, and give no impression of even being tempted in that direction. There are lots of people, too, for whom work is a drudgery, something from which to get away with all possible speed, who are yoked to an occupation which they do not enjoy and in which they are more or less miserable. I am not addressing myself to either groups. But rather I have in mind the men and women whose friends say they haven't a lazy bone in their body, who love their work, believe in it, derive a pleasure from it, but who are giving far too much time and strength and nervous energy to it; the people who are disregarding the strict limits - physical, mental, spiritual - which an individual may transgress. Isn't it time that something was said about this sin of overwork?

## THE SIN OF OVERWORK

The sin of overwork. Work itself is no sin.

It has been spoken of as a punishment and a curse, yet it is far from being that. One is reminded of Carlyle's affirmation that a man perfects himself by working. "Blessed is the man who has found his work, let him ask no other blessing". To his hard working mother Carlyle wrote about a certain Lady Sandwich: "Plenty of money and fair health; but alas - nothing to do. That is not a very easy life after all." And how true. Work is one of our unchanging needs. It is a blessing. Men often tell themselves that when they retire they will have done with work, but unless they work at something they will go down hill incredibly fast. Work is the salt of life, preserving it from decay and corruption, giving it zest and flavor.

Work is not a sin, but overwork definitely is. For one thing, there is what happens to the work itself. Industry knows that an overwrought man is not going to turn out a good job. Labor suffers in quality when the laborer is kept too long at the job. The lesson is one that management itself is sometimes slow to learn. I read somewhere recently that Henry Ford once remarked that the internal combustion engine for his first automobile would have been produced in one third less time if the men who worked at it steadily for several months - day and night - week in and week out - had taken more time away from the job to rest and relax. Unless you are a quite exceptional person, you can't do well, really well, more than a definite and limited amount of work. When a person overworks, the work itself suffers.

And then too, the worker is apt to suffer. Consider what is likely to happen to his body. Let an individual go on from week to week and from month to month with every day planned and every day filled and look what happens. Nature rebels. The body, under strain for so long, can't take the strain any longer. It can stand only a certain amount of neglect and ill treatment, and after that it revolts. Its vitality sapped, either it wears down or it breaks down.

The overworked person is apt to be irritable and nervous. His face tells eloquently what is happening inside him even if he does not. He can't relax. He feels the need of stimulants - cigarettes, coffee, cocktails - and more and more of them. He feels the need of tranquilizers. Finding that sleep is hard to come by, he learns to depend on sleeping pills. He is apt to flare up emotionally at the slightest pretext and in the most unreasonable and childish ways. Whether at home or at business, he is not an easy person to live with. So life is sacrificed to the work of life. What should be a means to an end becomes an end in itself. People become so occupied and preoccupied with their business that they practically sacrifice everything to it. It may be the health of their body or their mind. They may scarcely know their own children with any degree of understanding. They may give themselves no time to trim the lamp of friendship or to cultivate the life of their soul.

## A PLEA FOR THREE THINGS

I would like to make a plea for three things. The first of them is leisure.

You owe it to yourself, your inner and deepest self, as well as to your relatives and associates, to slow up, to moderate the pressure

You owe it to yourself to take time out. There should be rhythms in human life, as there are rhythms in nature; first, stress of toil, and then happy release from it; first, diligent service and then rewarding rest. There is an old Egyptian saying which goes like this:

"The boatman reaches the landing, partly by pulling, partly by letting go. The archers strike the target, partly by pulling and partly by letting go".

In order to hit the target of your life, you may need to let go occasionally and learn to relax. We can't all live like Thoreau, but we can all learn from him. "My days" he once said, "were not days of the week bearing the stamp of any heathen deity, nor were they minced into hours and fretted by the ticking of the clock". It's pathetic when a man requires to have his eye everlastingly on the clock. Make leisure. Insist on having it. It is one of the greatest of God's gifts and the best of medicines for body and soul. W. H. Davies never wrote a poem with more challenge in it for our hurrying, feverish age than when he composed these lines:

"What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare....

No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, and like skies at night...

A poor life this if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare...."

And secondly, I would make a plea for a sense of perspective in the ordering of business and the management of time. Let us try to see things and to keep things in their true proportions. Work is important, but so is home and friendship and worship. I read recently in one of our papers where a respectable citizen was in court and saw his son sentenced to a term of imprisonment for a grave offense. The father made a plea for the boy. He had been allowed too much liberty and had been running wild. He, the father that is, had been out of the home day and night attending to his business. What do you suppose the judge told the father. "You have been too busy to do your duty"

There is something in that distressing incident for us all. Are we too busy to do our plain duty in the home, the church, the community? Are the prior claims receiving from us the consideration they merit. Are we so pushed and driven that some of the finest gifts of God to us - good books, inspiring music, the great world out of doors - go uncultivated. I recall something the late John Baillie, one of Scotland's great theologians, told us in the class room in Edinburgh. He suggested that the world, as we live in it, is like a shop window into which some mischevious person has entered overnight and shifted all the price labels around so that the cheap things have the high price labels on them and the really precious things are priced low. We allow ourselves to be taken in.

And in the third place, I would like to make a plea for the recognition in your lives of the supreme values for which Jesus stood. When a minister talks about the overcrowded life, and the pressure and the pace being greater than they ought to be, and the need for doing less, for cutting things out and having more leisure, someone is apt to remark, half in jest and half in earnest, that he may find himself faced with resignations from church committees and absences from the Sunday worship service. He has to risk that. He knows from observation and experience what happens when some slow down. The first activity to be affected is their religious activity. If they are to rest from their labors, Sunday morning seems to be the morning for it.

That is why I am making a plea for a recognition of the supreme values for which Christ stood. We have to practice discrimination. We have to pick and choose. There are some things we should have no time for. There are some things we should include at all costs. The spiritual should have priority over the material. Our duty to God should come before our duty to anybody or anything else. First things should be put first.

In the parable of Jesus that I read to you for our scripture lesson this morning, there is a man who prepared a great feast and sent out invitations to his friends to be his guests. One by one they tendered their apologies. The first had bought a farm and felt he should go and look it over. The second had made a good deal in purchasing five yoke of oxen, and he wanted to try them out. The third had recently married and could not leave his wife. At that the host told his servants to go out and bring into the feast the poor, the crippled, and the blind. Do you see the point that our Lord was making? All three men were engaged in a perfectly legitimate activity, but they were so taken up with them - so engrossed and immersed in them - that they could find no time for anything else. They were oblivious to the other interests of life - to its higher interests - and they were tragically crowded out.

The sad thing is that this sort of thing is still happening in the lives of people today. It may be that the word of God for you this morning is this: distinguish between what is primary and what is secondary.....between what is vital and what is not.....what is urgent and what can wait.....between what is of great value and what in the long run is of little value. Give the spiritual priority in your life. Don't permit yourself to be taken in.

LET US PRAY: As we pause in thy presence, Our Father, and realize the presence of the spirit of Christ in our midst, let us be silent to hear what He has to say about ourselves and our work. Give us the strength to renew our perspective, to manage our business and our time in better fashion, and above all else may we put Thee first in our Lives. Amen