

AN OLD SUBSCRIPTION LIST

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"And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing, and they brought Yahweh's offering to the work of the tabernacle of the congregation, . . ."
Exodus 35:21.

This is the beginning of the catalogue of contributions towards the erection of the Tabernacle in the wilderness. It emphasizes the purely spontaneous and voluntary character of the gifts. There was plenty of compulsory work, of statutory contribution, in the Old Testament system of worship. Sacrifices and tithes and other things were imperative, but the Tabernacle was constructed by means of undemanded offerings, and there were parts of the standing ritual which were left to the promptings of the worshipper's own spirit. There was always a door through which the impulses of devout hearts could come in, to animate what else [otherwise] would have become dead, mechanical compliance with prescribed obligations. That spontaneous surrender of precious things, not because a man must give them, but because he delights in letting his love come to the surface and find utterance in giving (which is still more blessed than receiving) had but a narrow and subordinate sphere of action assigned to it in the legal system of the Old Covenant, but it fills the whole sphere of Christianity, and becomes the only kind of offering which corresponds to its genius and is acceptable to Christ. We may look, then, not merely at the words of our text, but at the whole section of which they form the introduction, and find large lessons for ourselves--not only in regard to the one form of Christian service which is pecuniary liberality, but in reference to all which we have to do for Jesus Christ--in the picture which it gives us of that eager crowd of willing givers, flocking to the presence of the lawgiver with hands laden with gifts so various in kind and value, but all precious because freely and delightedly brought and all needed for the structure of God's house.

1. We have set forth here the true motive of acceptable service.

'They came, every one whose heart stirred him up, and every one whom his spirit made willing.' There is a striking metaphor in that last word. Wherever the spirit is touched with the sweet influences of God's love, and loves and gives back again, that spirit is buoyant, lifted, raised above the low, flat levels where selfishness feeds fat and then rots. The spirit is raised by any great and unselfish emotion. There is buoyancy and glad consciousness of elevation in all the self-sacrifice of love, which dilates and lifts the spirit as the light gas smooths out the limp folds of silk in a balloon, and sends it heavenwards a full sphere. Only service or surrender which is thus cheerful, because it is the natural expression of love, is true service in God's sight. Whosoever, then, had his spirit raised and made buoyant by a great glad resolve to give up some precious thing for God's sanctuary, came with his gift in his hand, and he and it were accepted. That trusting of men's giving to spontaneous liberality was exceptional under the law. It is normal under the Gospel, and has filled the whole field, and driven out the other principle of statutory and constrained service and sacrifice altogether. We have its feeble beginnings in this incident. It is sovereign in Christ's Church. There are no pressed men on board Christ's ship. None but volunteers make up His army. 'Thy people shall be willing in the day of Thy might.' He cares nothing for any service but such as it would be pain to keep back; nothing for any service which is not given with a smile of glad thankfulness that we are able to give it.

And for the true acceptableness of Christian service, that motive of thankful love must be actually present in each deed. It is not enough that we should determine on and begin a course of sacrifice or work under the influence of that great motive, unless we renew it at each step. We cannot hallow a row of actions in that wholesale fashion by baptizing the first of them with the cleansing waters of true consecration, while the rest are done from lower

motives. Each deed must be sanctified by the presence of the true motive if it is to be worthy of Christ's acceptance. But there is a constant tendency in all Christian work to slide off its only right foundation and, having been begun 'in the spirit,' to be carried on 'in the flesh.' Constant watchfulness is needed to resist this tendency, which if yielded to destroys the worth and power, and changes the inmost nature of apparently devoted and earnest service.

Not the least subtle and dangerous of these spurious motives which steal in surreptitiously to mar our work for Christ is habit. Service done from custom, and representing no present impulse of thankful devotion, may pass muster with us, but does it do so with God? No doubt a habit of godly service is in some aspects a good, and it is well to enlist that tremendous power of custom, which sways so much of our lives, on the side of godliness. But it is not good, but on the contrary pure loss, when habit becomes mechanical, and instead of making it easier to call up the true motive excludes that motive and makes it easy to do the deed without it. I am afraid that if such thoughts were applied as a sieve to sift the abundant so-called Christian work of the present day, there would be an alarming and, to the workers, astonishing quantity of refuse that would not pass the meshes.

Let us, then, try to bring every act of service nominally done for Christ into conscious relation with the motive which ought to be its parent; for only the work that is done because our spirits lift us up, and our hearts are willing, is work that is accepted by Him and is blessed to us.

And how is that to be secured? How is that glad temper of spontaneous and cheerful consecration to be attained and maintained? I know of but one way. 'Brethren,' said the Apostle, when he was talking about a very little matter--some small collection for a handful of poor people--'ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, how that, though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we, through His poverty, might become rich.' Let us keep our eyes fixed upon that great pattern of and motive for surrender and our hearts will become willing, touched with the fire that flamed in His. There is only one method of securing the gladness and spontaneousness of devotion and of service, and that is, living very near to Jesus Christ, and drinking in for ourselves, as the very wine that turns to blood and life in our veins, the spirit of that dear Master. Every one whose heart is lifted up will have it lifted up because it holds on by Him who hath ascended up, and who, being 'lifted up, draws all men to Him.' The secret of consecration is communion with Jesus Christ.

The appeal to lower motives is often tempting, but always a mistake. Continual contact with Jesus Christ, and realization of what He has done for us, are sure to open the deep fountains of the heart and to secure abundant streams. If we can tap these perennial reservoirs they will yield like artesian wells, and need no creaking machinery to pump a scanty and intermittent supply. We cannot trust this deepest motive too much, nor appeal to it too exclusively.

Let me remind you, too, that Christ's appeal to this motive leaves no loophole for selfishness or laziness. Responsibility is all the greater because we are left to assess ourselves. The blank form is sent to us, and He leaves it to our honor to fill it up. Do not tamper with the paper, for remember there is a Returning Officer that will examine your schedule, who knows all about your possessions. So when He says, 'Give as you like; and I do not want anything that you do not like,' remember that 'Give as you like' ought to mean, 'Give as you, who have received everything from Me, are bound to give.'

2. We get here the measure of acceptable work.

We have a long catalogue, very interesting in many respects, of the various gifts that the people brought. Such sentences as these occur over and over again--'And every man with whom was found' so-and-so 'brought it'; 'And all the women did spin with their hands, and

brought that which they had spun'; 'And the rulers brought' so-and-so. Such statements embody the very plain truism that what we have settles what we are bound to give. Or, to put it into grander words, capacity is the measure of duty. Our work is cut out for us by the faculties and opportunities that God has given us.

That is a very easy thing to say, but it is an uncommonly hard thing honestly to apply. For there are plenty of people that are smitten with very unusual humility whenever you begin to talk to them about work. 'It is not in my way,' 'I am not capable of that kind of service,' and so on and so on. One would believe in the genuineness of the excuse more readily if there were anything about which such people said, 'Well, I *can* do that, at all events'; but such an all-round modesty, which is mostly observable when service is called for, is suspicious. It might be well for some of these retiring and idle Christians to remember the homely wisdom of 'You never know what you can do till you try.' On the other hand, there are many Christians who, for want [lack] of honest looking into their own power, for want of what I call sanctified originality, are content to run in the ruts that other people's vehicles have made, without asking themselves whether that is the gauge that their wheels are fit for. Both these sets of people flagrantly neglect the plain law that what we have settles what we should give.

The form as well as the measure of our service is determined thereby. 'She hath done what she could,' said Jesus Christ about Mary. We often read that as if it were a kind of apology for a sentimental and useless gift, because it was the best that she could bestow. I do not hear that tone in the words at all. I hear, rather, this--that duty is settled by faculty, and that nobody else has any business to interfere with that which a Christian soul, all aflame with the love of God, finds to be the spontaneous and natural expression of its devotion to the Master. The words are the vindication of the form of loving service; but let us not forget that they are also a very stringent requirement as to its measure, if it is to please Christ. 'What she could'; the engine must be worked up to the last ounce of pressure that it will stand. All must be got out of it that can be got out of it. Is that the case about us? We talk about hard work for Christ. Have any of us ever worked up to the edge of our capacity? I am afraid that if the principles that lie in this catalogue were applied to us, whether about our gold and silver or about our more precious spiritual and mental possessions, we could not say, 'Every man with whom was found' this, that, and the other, 'brought it for the work.'

3. Notice, again, how in this list of offerings there comes out the great thought of the infinite variety of forms of service and offering, which are all equally needful and equally acceptable.

The list begins with 'bracelets, and earrings, and rings, and tablets, all jewels of gold.' And then it goes on to 'blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen, and red skins of rams, and badgers' skins, and shittim wood.' And then we read that the 'women did spin with their hands, and brought that which they had spun'--namely, the same things as have been already catalogued, 'the blue, and purple, and scarlet, and fine linen.' That looks as if the richer gave the raw material, and the women gave the labor. Poor women! they could not give, but they could spin. They had no stores, but they had ten fingers and a distaff, and if some neighbor found the stuff, the ten fingers joyfully set the distaff twirling, and spun the yarn for the weavers. Then there were others who willingly undertook the rougher work of spinning, not dainty thread for the rich soft stuffs whose colors were to glow in the sanctuary, but the coarse black goat's hair which was to be made into the heavy covering of the roof of the tabernacle. No doubt it was less pleasant labor than the other, but it got done by willing hands. And then, at the end of the whole enumeration, there comes, 'And the rulers brought precious stones, and spices, and oil,' and all the expensive things that were needed. The large subscriptions are at the bottom of the list, and the smaller ones are in the place of honor. All this just teaches us this--what a host of things of all degrees of preciousness in men's eyes go to make God's great building!

So various were the requirements of the work on hand. Each man's gift was needed, and

each in its place was equally necessary. The jewels on the high-priest's breastplate were no more nor less essential than the wood that made some peg for a curtain, or than the cheap goat's-hair yarn that was woven into the coarse cloth flung over the roof of the Tabernacle to keep the wet out. All had equal consecration, because all made one whole. All was equally precious, if all was given with the same spirit. So there is room for all sorts of work in Christ's great house, where there are not only 'vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth,' and all 'unto honor . . . meet for the Master's use.' The smallest deed that co-operates to a great end is great. 'The more feeble are necessary.' Every one may find a corner where his special possession will work into the general design. If I have no jewels to give, I can perhaps find some shittim wood, or, if I cannot manage even that, I can at least spin some other person's yarn, even though I have only a distaff and not a loom to weave it in. Many of us can do work only when associated with others, and can render best service by helping some more highly endowed. But all are needed, and welcomed, and honored, and rewarded. The owner of all the slaves sets one to be a water-carrier and another to be his steward. It is of little consequence whether the servant be Paul or Timothy, the Apostle or the Apostle's helper. 'He worketh the work of the Lord, as I also do,' said the former about the latter. All who are associated in the same service are on one level.

I remember once being in the treasury of a royal palace. There was a long gallery in which the Crown valuables were stored. In one compartment there was a great display of emeralds, and diamonds, and rubies, and I know not what, that had been looted from some Indian rajah or other. And in the next case there lay a common quill pen, and beside it a little bit of discolored coarse serge. The pen had signed some important treaty, and the serge was a fragment of a flag that had been borne triumphant from a field where a nations' destinies had been sealed. The two together were worth a farthing at the outside, but they held their own among the jewels, because they spoke of brain-work and bloodshed in the service of the king. Many strangely conjoined things lie side by side in God's jewel-cases. Things which people vulgarly call large and valuable, and what people still more vulgarly call small and worthless, have a way of getting together there. For in that place the arrangement is not according to what the thing would fetch if it were sold, but what was the thought in the mind and the emotion in the heart which gave it. Jewels and camel's-hair yarn and gold and silver are all massed together. Wood is wanted for the Temple quite as much as gold and silver and precious stones.

So whatever we have, let us bring that; and whatever we are, let us bring that. If we be poor and our work small, and our natures limited, and our faculties confined, it does not matter. A man is accepted 'according to that he hath, and not according to that he hath not.' God does not ask how much we have given or done, if we have given or done what we could. But He does ask how much we have kept back, and takes strict account of the unsundered possessions, the unimproved opportunities, the unused powers. He gives much who gives all, though his all be little; he gives little who gives a part, though the part be much. The motive sanctifies the act, and the completeness of the consecration magnifies it. 'Great' and 'small' are not words for God's Kingdom in which the standard is not quantity but quality, and quality is settled by the purity of the love which prompts the deed and the consequent thoroughness of self-surrender which it expresses. Whoever serves God with a whole heart will render to Him a whole strength, and will thus bring Him the gifts which He most desires.