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THE GOSPEL OF WORK.¹

“THE latest gospel in this world is, Know thy work and do it,” says Carlyle. It is also a pretty early gospel, which has driven man by necessity, assuring him that in the sweat of his brow he must eat his bread. The Christian faith has ever made much of the duty and even of the dignity of work, finding its highest plea for this dignity in the thought that God is the supreme Worker, and offering to man the thrilling motive to become a fellow-worker with God. The earthly activities are not despised; as in a religion like Buddhism, but are set forth as divinely appointed instruments of spiritual discipline and occasions for growth in grace, and are set forth also as the approved opportunities for service, the good fruits of the good tree of faith.

Christianity has as one of its ideals the consecration of the secular life, making daily duty subserve the best interests of character, and elevating the ordinary vocation into a sphere of service. It lifts the whole subject also into the plane of religion by taking account of the spirit in which all work is done rather than the particular tasks themselves, making the obligation of work universal and offering to each man in his own place and lot an ideal for himself. Even in the monastic system, which was specially designed for holiness, and which was at best a one-sided and mistaken attempt, this practical side was not neglected; and *labour* took its place beside *prayer* as an equally necessary implement for religious culture. The Christian standard of conduct is indeed set so high that the most plausible objection to it is that it is impracticable. In Christian ethics duty received a new meaning and point,

¹ The Murtle Lecture, delivered in Aberdeen University, Feb. 8, 1903.

and was enforced by the highest sanctions. Since life is a probation, the appeal for faithfulness even in the trivial routine comes home to the individual conscience. Thus the gospel of work is implied in the Gospel itself, and never has it found such a commanding motive as the Christian faith has given it. It has never been dignified with the name of a gospel in itself. It has rather been accepted as one of the facts of human life, and has been drawn into the service of the highest interests of men.

I might well spend the time of this lecture along an accustomed line showing how our religion deals with the secular life generally, and how it enforces nature's demand for labour by adding an inspiring motive, and how work is made a duty not only to self and to society but also a duty to God. I might touch on the blessings it brings and the moral ends it serves. There are plenty of useful and needful lessons in Christian ethics from this subject as to how work should be done, the faithfulness that should mark it throughout, and the rewards in character and capacity it assuredly brings. But the very phrase so common to-day, the "Gospel of Work" suggests that in some quarters the subject is not looked on from this Christian standpoint, but is made a substitute for religion itself. It is spoken of with something like religious enthusiasm. Christianity asserts that faith without works is dead, but here we seem to have works attempting to show life without faith at all. There is a modern preaching of a gospel of work which slights faith and arrogates to itself something like the supreme place of religion. "Properly speaking," says Carlyle, "all true work is religion; and whatsoever religion is not work may go and dwell among the Brahmins, Antinomians, Spinning Dervishes, or where it will; with me it shall have no harbour. Admirable is that of the old monks, *Laborare est orare*, work is worship." In many writers work is treated as if it were enough for man, or at least it is assumed

that it is all there is for man. He is called on to "fill and moralize the day," in the French phrase of which Matthew Arnold was so fond. The day is to be so filled and moralized by work, because the night cometh when no man can work. The pathos of life, with its uncertainty and brevity, gives a sort of passion to the preaching of the gospel of work.

We can see how this strenuous creed should appeal to an earnest man who realizes how short the time is. Indeed it is interesting to notice how often our Lord's phrase that the night cometh is made the basis for the new Stoicism. After all, the great fact of life to all men is that the night cometh when no man can work. However we look at it, whatever be our faith about the future, we are brought up to this termination. There may be, as Browning sang, "other heights in other lives, God willing"; but here there is a limit to any earthly height, and a swift descent into the dark. To the wise man and to the fool, as the preacher said in his irony, the selfsame end comes. However the day is spent, the night at last arrives. The active body, the thinking brain, the feeling heart, the aspiring soul cease from action and thought and feeling and aspiring on this plane where these powers have hitherto acted. Whether or not the kind of life we live conditions death and after-death, it cannot be denied that death conditions and limits life. All philosophy must take account of it. To leave it out in any system of thought that pretends to represent human life is like Hamlet with the part of the Prince of Denmark left out. Our practical ethics must be affected by our view of this dread subject. The whole contents of life, what it is in essence, what it is for, what it will become, are determined by this. We cannot always keep life and death in two distinct categories and arrange a handy little moral code for the one without reference to the other. We must ultimately co-ordinate our thinking

over the whole sphere of human existence, and take into account all the facts; and the greatest fact of life is death. The fact that the night cometh gives colour and urgency to the day. It fills it with meaning or turns it into a farce; touches it with pathos or with tragedy. A day with a night coming, scraping its heels as it follows, can never be as a day with no night. And what we mean by the term "night" will unfailingly influence our conception of what the day is. If the night be a sleeping to wake, or if it be a complete and absolute end of light, our view of the hours that fill up the day must be different. Or assume that another day will dawn and the shadows of night flee away, much in our conception of the value of life will depend on whether the succeeding day has intimate relation with the previous one or means the beginning of a bran-new existence. Creed and conduct in this all-important matter must react on each other. The Christian faith, which lights up the future with a great hope, by that also gives an immense motive power to ordinary life; and any form of materialism or even of agnosticism which denies immortality must inevitably alter the practical ethics of men. To put a meaning of despair into the words "the night cometh when no man can work" must consciously or unconsciously affect daily life and the standards and sanctions by which men live. To take away the authority of religion and the faith in the spiritual world around and above and beyond us is bound to create vast changes in the outlook of life and the practice of life. It is absurd to expect that faith can be eclipsed in our midst and yet leave us where we were.

Now it does not follow that the first and only effect of such eclipse of faith must be an immediate and universal relaxation of morality. It is indeed according to historical analogy in similar times, and according to experience of our own time, to predict that it need not be so. To many, if not to the mass, it is true, the natural result of the denial

of God and immortality can only mean the lowering of life all along the line. If we are as the beasts that perish and like them to-morrow we die, then we cannot wonder if the simple popular philosophy is accepted, "Let us eat and drink; let us snatch the day ere it flies, for the night cometh soon." We are expecting more of human nature than human nature has hitherto meant if we do not lay our account for such easy reasoning. Thoughtless enjoyment of the present becomes a feasible and even a rational plan of life. Duty cannot maintain her place of authority as the stern daughter of the voice of God. Can you ask men to deny themselves, to live for the future, to follow the gleam, to nurse high thought and noble effort, if you tell them that the ideal is only a malady of which men sicken and wear out? What is the use of struggling and striving if there be no end to reach and no standard of morality beyond tradition or custom or convenience? Why make a god of duty when every other god is dethroned? Why work to the highest and fullest of a short strenuous day, when there is nothing to add except that the night cometh when no man can work? Such argument cannot be answered except by an appeal to some sense of obligation, which is after all only a relic of religious sentiment or education. We can say nothing further to the man who draws out the bitter conclusion of the eclipse of faith, "All is vanity, and what profit hath a man of all his labour under the sun?"

At the same time it must be admitted that this is not the only alternative to one who accepts the full agnostic position. Even here there is a better part followed by the man who is earnest and serious. Such an one says that since the night cometh when no man can work he will therefore work while it is day and give himself to the best he can command. Matthew Arnold, who knew well the temptation to which men succumb when faith is loosened,

strikes this high note. In his fine poem, *The Better Part*, after stating the common argument of the man who has ceased to believe in Christ and in eternal life, he goes on—

So answerest thou; but why not rather say:
Hath man no second life? *Pitch this one high!*
Sits there no Judge in Heaven, our sin to see?

More strictly than the inward judge obey!
Was Christ a man like us?—*Ah, let us try*
If we then too can be such men as he!

Of course it is a consequence of the position to try to show that loss of faith does not necessarily mean the impoverishment of moral life; hence the attempt to string men's conscience up to this high pitch. But we must admit that the immediate result of unbelief may be to do so to the earnest-hearted. The modern Gospel of work, which has such a place in ethical writers, is to some extent a direct consequence of the weakening of faith. Because the night cometh when no man can work, with its tragedy of a broken life, let us shut our teeth and straighten our back and go through with it; let us work while it is day: there is nothing better than this, nothing more worthy of man than stern unflinching devotion to duty. Carlyle would not have been so insistent on his gospel of work if he had a richer gospel to declare. It is a new version of the old theological antinomy between faith and good works, this time for the sake of temporal instead of eternal salvation.

We can easily see how the tendency works out. In the waning of spiritual life the earnest soul turns to duty, seeks to slake the infinite thirst by labour. The noble-minded whose creed is a denial of the Divine can only look for peace by stern repression of human needs, and seek a gospel of work to dull the pain of what is really a gospel of despair. Huxley, both by precept and by example, sets forth this virile consequence of his unfaith. Just because the night

cometh when no man can work he was abundant in labour, and in his *Evolution and Ethics* he calls upon his hearers to play the man and to attempt some work of noble note. We remember the fine finish of that lecture with its plain preaching of the new Stoicism, summoning men to the great moral task to cherish the good and to bear the evil with stout hearts, striving ever to diminish it; calling us to be

strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.

Man who refuses any more to be lured on by hope is to be driven on by despair. There is a Christian gospel of work, as we have seen, in which the meanest details of duty are glorified by being done for love, and even drudgery is made divine, and all the discipline of daily work is used for the growth in grace and character which are yet to blossom out in fine flower under the smile of God. But here is a gospel of work, which takes no account of such motives, which bends to the tasks without being braced by the hope.

It is indeed a remarkable phenomenon, a new form of works without faith, of morality without religion. It is at best only a counsel of despair, making the best of a bad job, a poor enough substitute for what is lost, but we must do justice to the touch of nobility in it. Romanes has a passage which illustrates admirably some of the points insisted on, in his *A Candid Examination of Theism*, in which he took up a position of agnosticism and almost of materialism, a position which he left in after years to come back to his old faith in the gospel of Christ. The passage is interesting too because it lays stress on feelings of the heart rare enough in philosophical writings of the kind, and because it does not hide the poverty of the new position. "And forasmuch as I am far from being able to agree with those who affirm that the twilight doctrine of the 'new faith' is a desirable substitute for the waning splendour of 'the old,'

I am not ashamed to confess that with this virtual negation of God the universe to me has lost its soul of loveliness; and although from henceforth the precept 'to work while it is day' will doubtless gain an intensified force from the terribly intensified meaning of the words that 'the night cometh when no man can work,' yet when at times I think, as I think at times I must, of the appalling contrast between the hallowed glory of that creed which once was mine and the lonely mystery of existence as now I find it, at such times I shall ever feel it impossible to avoid the sharpest pang of which my nature is susceptible. For whether it be due to my intelligence not being sufficiently advanced to meet the requirements of the age, or whether it be due to the memory of those sacred associations which to me at least were the sweetest that life has given, I cannot but feel that for me, and for others who think as I do, there is a dreadful truth in those words of Hamilton, philosophy having become a meditation not merely of death but of annihilation, the precept *know thyself* has become transformed into the terrific oracle of Oedipus—

Mayest thou ne'er know thé truth of what thou art."

We have here again the gospel of work as a pitiful substitute for the fuller, richer gospel of the love of God. Out of all the wreckage of the stranded faith the only thing to him that can be called a moral gain is the sterner necessity to lay hold of present duty, the intensified force of the precept to work while it is day because of the lurid meaning of the night that cometh. Here also there is no attempt to deny that it is a poor asset to recover from such a tragic bankruptcy.

We must honour those who meet the eclipse of faith in such heroic mood, instead of weakly assenting to the softer creed, "Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die"; as in the decay of pagan faith we honour the Stoics who preached a similar doctrine of honour and duty as opposed to the

Epicurean alternative ; though from the premises the one is as logical as the other, and from some points of view is even more rational than the other. But will such a modern Stoicism last? Will such a gospel of work wear? Will it not be, as it was in Rome, a sort of luxury of a few strong and noble souls who cling to something stable when the foundation of life is removed? After all why should there be any *sacredness* in labour, which is one of Carlyle's phrases in praise of it? And why should he protest so vehemently against the gospel of happiness and against the gospel of liberty, which he thinks must ruin the best in life, when all he has to offer is a painful gospel of work? He thinks that the whole wretchedness and atheism of man's ways in these generations shadows itself for us in the pretension to be what we call happy. "Every pitifullest whipster that walks within a skin has his head filled with the notion that he is, shall be, or by all human and divine laws ought to be, happy." The strenuous answer he offers to this demand for happiness is, "'Happy' my brother? First of all, what difference is it whether thou art happy or not? To-day becomes yesterday so fast, all To-morrows become Yesterdays; and there is no question whatever of the 'happiness,' but quite another question." "It is, after all, the one unhappiness of a man, that he cannot work; that he cannot get his destiny as a man fulfilled. Behold the day is passing swiftly over, our life is passing swiftly over; and the night cometh wherein no man can work. The night once come, our happiness, our unhappiness—it is all abolished, vanished, clean gone: a thing that has been." We need the noble scorn of such words, as they are a strong moral tonic. But even the pitifullest whipster has the right to ask why work should be his destiny as a man; and if it makes no difference whether he is happy or not, he may ask what difference it makes whether he works or not when the everlasting night, with

her silences and veracities, is come? You may despise the man who chooses what appears to you the weaker and lower alternative, but it is difficult to see what grounds you have to condemn him.

Certain it is that work divorced from faith loses its great inspiring motive to drive life into the high regions. The true gospel of work, and the only one that can apply to all and be a force to every man that believes, is that which our Lord stated for Himself, "I must work the works of Him that sent me while it is day." It is the recognition that life has a divine purpose and meaning, and will have a divine judgment. The night cometh, the end of the day of opportunity and service comes; and so there is a note of urgency in it, not because that is all we have, but because if we have lost the great opportunity of the day of probation we have lost the opportunity of being and becoming and doing and serving, growing in grace, and performing the Father's Will. This faith in God, and in God's future for us, adds a glorious light to all service, however small and petty it looks; for it is not the work in itself that counts, but the spirit in which it is done, the manner of doing it, and the lessons learned in doing. The true ennobling of work is by flooding it with the light of eternity, and by colouring it with the glory of love. Work, like everything else in life, needs to be redeemed from vanity. Godless work is blasted by the same essential condemnation as Godless life. The night cometh for it. It is only "in the Lord" that labour is not in vain, done of faith and done for love. "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

HUGH BLACK.