

The Nobility of Work.

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Gen. iii. 19 pt. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread."

In the words of the text the thought which is suggested to our minds is that work is a kind of hardship imposed upon mankind as a punishment for disobedience to a commandment of God. Yet even before the Fall a certain duty was given to man. He was placed in the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. After the Garden had been planted, and every kind of tree caused by God to grow in it, and "a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground," there was felt to be something wanting. "There was not a man to till the ground." "So man was formed." And that he was meant to work, one may well suppose was a part of God's scheme for his well-being. Life would have been a poor sort of existence without some object on which a man might direct his activity.

Work has been defined as activity directed [sic] to an end or purpose. Perhaps for our own present purpose we ought to think of work as activity rightly directed, and to assume that the end or purpose to which it is directed is a good and noble one. Upon this depend the quality of the work achieved, and the spirit in which it is done. From the first, we see, it was a part of God's scheme that man should work. But between work as it was conceived of before the Fall of Man and as it is represented to be after the Fall, there appears to be this difference. In the first instance, work did not involve toil or fatigue. It was a labour of love, for man stood in the relation of an obedient son to a Father whom he loved and trusted. But after the Fall work took on the nature of toil and drudgery; it was an unwilling

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service, attended with hardship. The ground was cursed for man's sake and produced thorns and thistles to add to his difficulties. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread."

But are there no redeeming features about work? Is work always to be associated with a curse? We will answer the question out of our own experience. Do we find work a curse? Are we the better for work or the worse? Is our character strengthened or weakened by work? Of course, we allow that there are often unpleasant features about work, both in the work itself and in the effects of it. But, still, if work is rightly directed activity, and the end or purpose of it noble, the effect of it upon character cannot be other than good. We could not do otherwise than say that "work is ennobling, and idleness is detestable."

Is there not then a blessing concealed in the curse after all? Has not work a redemptive value healing and strengthening the soul? The text suggests what the first object of work is, namely to obtain the means of living. But how far beyond that object does work take us! Work is redemptive because it is educative. The difficulties which we meet with in the course of our work call out all our powers and resources of skill, inventiveness, patience and perseverance. We learn how dependent we are upon one another, and above all how dependent we are upon God. The sin which led to the Fall of Man was prompted by the desire to be as God, and so independent of Him. The essence of sin consists in our setting up our own will against the will of God. The sin by which the angels fell was pride. It is by humility that we are raised to untold heights, by learning of what little account we are in ourselves compared with God. And yet here

is the wonderful thing about ourselves and God, that God stoops to take account of us and asks us to work with Him. So in every task we undertake we need to find out what God's will is and to set ourselves to obey. Obedience should be the law of our life, for obedience expresses the right relation that there should be between ourselves and God, God the loving Father and we His dutiful children.

We often speak of the laws of nature. Laws are the expression of a will. The laws according to which we are

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governed represent the will of the people expressed at some time or other on some particular matter. The purpose of our laws is to safeguard our liberty by controlling it. They enable us to enjoy our rights and privileges as citizens, and at the same time teach us that we have fellow-citizens and that we must respect their rights and privileges. The Laws point out the limits within which we may exercise our rights, namely, just so far as we do not encroach upon the rights of others. The Laws of nature, too, are the expression of a will, the Will of God, for God reveals Himself in the world around us, as He does to our conscience and affections. The laws of nature are the summaries of the results of careful observations. The properties of various forms of matter have been carefully examined. If properly used they are found to do good: but if improperly, harm and damage are the consequence. Fire, water and electricity are three of the greatest forces with which we are acquainted. Under control they are of the greatest value: uncontrolled they work nothing but destruction. The flooded river breaking all bounds spreads devastation far and wide. The lightning, uncontrolled electricity, rends the oak or destroys the flocks. The waters of Niagara, controlled in turbines, generate the electricity which, in its turn, controlled, provides the lighting and works the tramcars of the town of Buffalo many miles away.

But it was by patient industry that man found out God's secrets and how to use them. He discovered how essential to success it is to be obedient to laws. And what a valuable discipline their labours proved to be to them. What lessons of patience, courage, perseverance and hope they learned during their long search for those mysteries of nature. And no matter what our particular work may be, the same lessons are learned from it. And one thing we must recognise, namely, that each of us has his proper work, to every one has been given his talent. "To every man his work" is the teaching of our Lord Himself. He also taught that men vary in their capacities, but whether we have five talents, or two, or one, each of us must do the best we can. We shall at the last be called to give account of what we received.

Again we must remember that whatever our work is, it

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is not for ourselves alone that we work. Not only are we dependent upon God but also we are dependent on one another. In the Bible two things are recognised, namely, that every talent is a gift from God, and that every one has a claim upon it. It is not for our own use only. Not only was Moses inspired by God to give the Law from Mount Sinai, but so also were Bezaleel and Aholiab, and the other men who were employed in the construction of the Tabernacle. "And Moses said to the children of Israel, See the Lord hath called by name Bezaleel, the son of Uri ... and He hath filled him with the spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding and in knowledge and in all manner of workmanship, and to devise curious works, to work in gold and in silver and in brass, and in the cutting of stones to set them, and in carving of wood, to make any manner of

cunning work. And He hath put in his heart that he may teach, both he and Aholiab. ...Them hath He filled with wisdom of heart to work all manner of work." ... The writer goes into such minuteness of detail for our instruction, for we can extend the list indefinitely to cover all the manifold occupations of the present day. St. Paul does so in the twelfth chapter of the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. "There are diversities of gifts but the same Spirit." What a difference it would make to human life, if we always bore this in mind, that all our gifts of mind and spirit and body are gifts of the Holy Spirit! There does not seem much that is spiritual about the daily occupation. It seems to be so essentially bound up with the earth. "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground: for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return." But surely it will alter our way of looking at things if we regard our occupation as our vocation in life: as that to which we have been specially called by God. It will suggest to us that even the humblest task is a kind of sacrament; the outward means through which spiritual grace is manifested and conferred. Even such simple acts as eating and drinking, St. Paul suggests can be done to the glory of God. And if those simple acts are rightly directed they are done to the glory of God. If we eat and drink for the purpose of keeping our bodies in a healthy condition, so that we can do our work efficiently,

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we do eat and drink to the glory of God, for we are keeping our bodies in a fit condition to do the work which God Himself prepared for us. By using all our faculties of mind and body in the proper manner, by putting them to the use for which they were intended, and by not misusing them, we are seeking the Glory of God. To bear all this in mind will do much to relieve our tasks of drudgery: will encourage us to do our best. There will be no scamped work, no grudging service.

In the last chapter of the Bible you have life described as it ought to be, as it is in the heavenly Jerusalem which "has the glory of God." And the very significant words occur, "And there shall be no more curse." I do not say that these words faithfully represent the meaning of the original Greek, but still the English words do suggest to us the abolition of the curse which was put upon the earth by "Man's first disobedience." "Through the obedience of one all have been made righteous." It is an ideal state of things, a vision of what may be, and will be, but a state of things towards which we may work in patience: a vision to inspire us when faith and hope grow dim. "Our citizenship is in heaven," but "the pattern shown in the mount" we shall endeavour to reproduce on earth: each of us doing his best in his vocation "not with eyeservice as man pleasers but as to the Lord, for we serve the Lord Christ." And when we feel at times through weariness the drudgery of work, and our particular work seems to be below our capacity, let us keep before us the example of our Saviour at work in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. We confess of Him in the Nicene Creed "By whom all things were made." Did He Who built the heavens and set the glorious stars in their courses think it beneath His dignity to make and repair the simple tools and furniture for the cottage homes of Nazareth? For the really great, nothing is so small as to be beneath their notice. They are great because they are attentive to small details. But what does attention to small details involve? Infinite patience. Perfection is made up of trifles, of small things, yet none is purposeless or unmeaning. Attention to them is rightly directed activity. How patient our Lord was, and is, in training His disciples for His work: the work that can be wrought nobly in the simplest of daily tasks.