

"Do the Next Thing"**J.R. Miller:**

DUTY never is a haphazard thing; it does not come to us in 'bundles' from which we may choose what we like best. There are never a half dozen things, any one of which we may fitly do at any particular time; there is someone definite and particular thing in the divine purpose for each moment. In writing music no composer strews the notes along the staff just as they happen to fall on this line or that space; he sets them in harmonious order and succession, so that they will make sweet music when played or sung. The builder does not fling the stones and the beams into the edifice without plan; every block and every piece of wood, stone or iron, and every brick, has its place and the building rises in graceful beauty.

The days are like the lines and spaces in the musical staff, and duties are the notes; each life is meant to be a perfect harmony, and in order to this "each single duty has its own proper place. One thing done out of its time and place" makes discord in the music of life, just as one note misplaced on the staff mars the harmony. Each life is a building, and the little acts are the materials used; the whole is congruous and beautiful only when every act is in its own true place. Everything is beautiful in its time "but out of time, the loveliest acts lose much of their loveliness.

The art of true living, therefore, consists largely in always doing the thing that belongs to the moment. But how to know what is the duty of each moment "is a question which to many is full of perplexity. Yet it would be easy if our obedience were but more simple. We have but to take the duty that comes next to our hand "that which the moment brings. "Do the next thing," says the quaint old Saxon legend. Our duty is never some far-away thing. We do not have to search for it; it is always close at hand and easily found. The trouble is, that we complicate the question of duty for ourselves, by our way of looking at life, and then get our feet entangled in the meshes which our own hands have woven!

Much of this confusion arises from taking too long views. We try to settle our duty in large sections. We think of years rather than of moments; of life-work rather than of individual acts. It is hard to plan a year's duty; it is easy to plan just for one short day. No shoulder can bear up the burden of a year's cares "all gathered up into one load! But the weakest shoulder can carry without weariness "just what really belongs to one day. In trying to grasp the whole year's duty "we are apt to overlook and to miss that of the present hour, just as one in gazing at a far-off mountain-top is likely not to see the little flower blooming at his feet, and even to tread it down as he stalks along.

There is another way in which many people complicate the question of duty. They try to reach decisions today "on matters that really are not before them today, and that will not be before them for months "possibly for years. For example, a young man came to me the other day in very sore perplexity over a question of duty. He said he could not decide whether to go as a foreign missionary, or to devote his life to work in some home-field. Yet he had but just closed his freshman year in college. It would require him three years to complete his college course, and then he would have to spend three years more in the theological seminary. Six years hence he would be ready for his work as a minister, and it was concerning his choice of field then, that the young man was now in such perplexity. He said that often he passed hours on his knees in prayer, seeking for light "but that no light had come. He had even tried fasting "but without avail. The matter had so taken possession of his mind, that he had scarcely been able to study during the last three months, and he had fallen behind his class. His health, too, he felt, was being endangered, as he often lay awake much of the night thinking upon the momentous question of his duty, as between home and foreign work.

It is very easy to see what was this young man's mistake: he was trying to settle now a question with which he had nothing whatever to do at the present time! If he is spared to complete his course of training, the question will emerge as a really practical one, five or six years hence. It is folly for him now to try to compel a decision which he cannot make intelligently and without perplexity; from the fact that he cannot so make it "it is evident that the decision is no part of his present duty. He wonders that he can get no light upon the matter "that even in answer to agonizing prayer, the perplexity does not grow less. But is there any ground to expect God to throw light on a man's path "so far in advance of his steps? Is there any promise that prayer for guidance at a point so remote "will be answered now? Why should it be? Will it not be time enough for the answer to come "when the decision is really to be made?

Certainly it is right for the young man to pray concerning this matter, but his present request should be that God would direct his preparation so that he may be fitted for the work, whatever it may be, that in the divine purpose is waiting for him, and that at the proper time God would lead him to his allotted field. "Lord, prepare me for what you are preparing for me," was the daily prayer of one young life. This is the fitting prayer for this

Christian student; but to pray that he may know now where the Lord will send him to labor six years hence, is certainly an unwarranted asking which is little short of presumption and of impertinent human intermeddling with divine things.

Another obvious element of mistake in this young man's case, is that he is neglecting his present duty, or failing to do it well—while he is perplexing himself about what his duty will be several years hence. Thus he is hindering the divine purpose, in his own preparation for the work his Master has planned for him. Life is not an hour too long; every moment of time allotted to us is necessary in realizing the divine plan for our lives. The preparatory years are enough, if they are faithfully used, in which to prepare for the years of life-work which come after. But every hour we waste, leaves its own flaw in our preparation. Many people go halting and stumbling all through life, missing opportunities and continually failing—where they ought to have succeeded, because they neglected their duty in the preparatory years.

The case of this student is typical of many. There are more people who worry about matters that belong altogether to the future—than there are who are anxious to do well the duty of the present moment. If we would simply do always the next thing, we would be relieved of all perplexity! This would also ensure our doing well, whatever God gives us to do. Instead of looking far on for our duty—we would then find it always close before us. Instead of trying to make out what we ought to do next year or six years hence—we would ask only what we shall do the present hour. Instead of looking for our duty in large sections—we should then receive it in detail.

By following this simple counsel, the young student would devote himself with all his energy—to the studies that belong to his present stage of progress. Possibly it may become quite plain to him early in his course, that his work as a minister will be in a particular field; if so, this fact may shape in some sense his preparation. But if it still remains uncertain in what particular branch of ministerial service he is to labor, he should not give himself a moment's perplexity on the subject. Clearly, God holds this as yet unrevealed in his own hands. The student's duty is to make the best possible use of his present opportunities for study and self-discipline. At the right time—he will have no difficulty in deciding where he is to work.

"Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light on my path." Psalm 119:105. God's Word is represented as a lamp for the feet. It is a lamp—not a blazing sun, nor even a lighthouse—but a plain, common lamp or lantern which one can carry about in the hand. It is a lamp "for the feet," not throwing its beams afar, not illumining a hemisphere—but shining only on the one little bit of road on which the pilgrim's feet are walking.

The law of divine guidance is, "Step by step." One who carries a lantern on a country-road at night, sees only one step before him. If he takes that step, he carries his lantern forward, and thus makes another step plain. At length he reaches his destination in safety, without once stepping into darkness. The whole way has been made light for him, though only a single step of it at a time. This illustrates the usual method of God's guidance.

If this is the way God guides, it ought never to be hard for us to find our duty. It never lies far away, inaccessible to us—but is always near. It never lies out of our sight, in the darkness, for God never puts our duty where we cannot see it. The thing that we think may be our duty—but which is still lying in obscurity and uncertainty, is not our duty yet, whatever it may be a little farther on. The duty for the very moment is always clear—and that is as far as we need concern ourselves; for when we do the little that is clear, we will carry the light on, and it will shine on the next moment's step.

Miners carry their small lamps fastened to their caps. These lamps do not flood the whole great dark chamber of the mine where the men work—but they do light the one little spot where the miner has to strike his pick. Duty is a lamp, and as we move forward in quiet obedience, we carry our own light with us, and thus never have to work in darkness, though it may be dense night close on all sides of us.

If not even one little step is plain to us, "the next thing" is to wait. Sometimes that is God's will for us. At least, it never is his will that we should take a step into the darkness. He never hurries us. We had better always wait—than rush on as if we are not quite sure of the way. Often in our impatience, we do rash things which we find after a little while—were not God's "next things" for us at all. That was Peter's mistake when he cut off a man's ear in the garden, and it led to sore trouble and humiliation a little later. There are many quick, impulsive people who are continually doing wrong next things, and who then find their next thing trying to undo the last. We must always wait for God—and never take a step which he has not made light for us.

Yet we must not be too slow; this danger is as great as that of being too quick. The people were never to go until the pillar moved; they were neither to run ahead—nor to lag behind. Indolence is as bad as rashness.

"Do the Next Thing"

There are some people who are never on time. They never do things just when they ought to be done. They are continually in perplexity which of several things they ought to do first. The trouble is, they are forever putting off or neglecting or forgetting things—and consequently each morning finds them facing not only that day's duties—but the omitted duties of past days! There never really are two duties for the same moment; and if everything is done in its time, there never will be any perplexity in discovering what is the right thing to do next.

It is a comfort to know that our duties are not the accidents of any undirected flow of circumstances. We are plainly assured that if we acknowledge the Lord in all our ways—that he will direct our paths—that is, if we keep eye and heart ever turned toward God, we shall never be left to grope after the path, for it will be pointed out to us.

We are authorized to pray, "Direct my footsteps according to Your Word" Psalm 119:133. What direction in duty, could be more minute than that? Jesus said, "He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness." We must note well the Master's word: it is he who follows Him—who shall not walk in darkness. We must not run on ahead of Him, neither must we lag behind; in either case we shall find it darkness—just as deep darkness in advance of our Guide if we will not wait for him—as it is behind him if we will not keep close up to him.

Prompt, unquestioning, undoubting following of Christ—takes all the perplexity out of Christian life and gives unbroken peace. There is something for every moment, and duty is always "the next thing." It may sometimes be an interruption, setting aside a cherished plan of our own, breaking into a pleasant rest for which we had arranged, or taking us away from a favorite occupation. It may be to meet a disappointment, to take up a cross, to endure a sorrow or to pass through a trial. It may be to go up stairs and be sick for a time, letting go one's hold on all active life; or it may be just the plainest, commonest bit of routine daily work in the house, in the office, on the farm, at school.

Most of us find the greater number of our "next things" in the tasks that are the same day after day—yet even in the interstices amid these set tasks, there come a thousand little things of kindness, patience, gentleness, thoughtfulness, obligingness, like the sweet flowers that grow in the crevices between the cold, hard rocks—and we should always be ready for these as we hurry along, as well as for the sterner duties that our common calling brings to us.

There never is a moment without its duty; and if we are living near to Christ and following him closely, we shall never be left in ignorance of what he wants us to do. If there is nothing—absolutely nothing—for us to do at any time—then we may be sure that the Master wants us to sit down a moment at his feet and rest. For he is not a hard Master, and, besides, rest is as needful in its time as work. We need to rest in order to work; so we must not worry when there come moments which seem to have no task for our hands. The next while.