

On Doing a Good Day's Work

F.B. Meyer:

LONGFELLOW'S village blacksmith felt that "something accomplished, something done," had earned a night's repose; and if suppose that he did little else than shoe the farmers' horses, or put new shares to their ploughs; yet he had the perpetual consciousness that he was doing something in the world, contributing to its well-being, performing a necessary part in the machinery of the village-life. It is not to be supposed that the honest man did his work for the money it brought him, but for the love of doing it, the pleasure of ministering, however humbly, to the common weal. However well he were paid, it would be a source of infinite regret and shame if his work were superficially and perfunctorily executed; if a horse were lamed, because the nail was driven too far home, or a day's work in the sowing-time were lost because the share broke in mid-furrow.

This is the ideal of all good work. Too many work for the wage to be paid them at the end of the week, and become so degraded in their aim that they will only put in the best work when they are promised the highest pay. Let the remuneration be second-rate, their work will be second-rate; let the workshop be a peasant's cottage, their style of workmanship will lack the finish which would certainly be put in for a palace or church. This appraising of our work by the amount of wage it will bring is vicious in the extreme, and sooner or later begets a perfunctory, superficial, and mean disposition. The man who reserves his best work for the best pay will ultimately be content to put in the semblance of the best work, though it be a bit of arrant scamping, in order to secure, as soon as he may, the promised wage; in this case, however, it should scorch his hand as the wage of unrighteousness.

Do you think that the old monks, who built religiously, and for the eye of God, stopped to ask whether some curiously carved stone was intended for the vaulted ceiling, or the ornamentation of a doorway through which successive generations of admiring pilgrims would pass? It was enough to be permitted to put one piece of carving in the house raised for the honor and glory of God; there must be nothing inferior there, nothing that would cause the carver shame if he met the memory of it in any world, nothing that would seem contemptible to future generations if it should drop from its place to lie within the easy inspection of every passer-by.

Can you imagine a true artist painting an inferior picture because it would be skied in an exhibition, or sold cheap at an auction? He would tell you that he dared not do it. He would be untrue to his loftiest ideals; if he permitted himself to fall so low, he would soon lose his power of realizing his dreams, and deteriorate into a sorry hack. The artist's eye would fail to perceive, the artist's hand to achieve. Nature would veil her charms from his eye, who sought them only for mercenary ends.

Would a physician, who was inspired with the true spirit of his profession, reserve his deepest insight, his longest patience, his most skilful treatment, for the rich, whose golden sovereigns would freely pour into his banking-account, whilst the child of the peasant might take its chance?

And if each of these is expected to do his work in the world for the honor of his profession, and the lasting benefit of men, why should not all men and women do whatever God has given them to do for the same high end? Not for fee or reward, not for the wages which are, of course, necessary and deserved, not for the applause and praise of one or many; but because work is honorable and noble, because a true man finds his highest reward in putting his noblest self into all he does, because it is a scandal and shame to be content with anything less than the best, because God and his high angels are looking on, and because scamped work will return on us in other worlds to confront and shame us. There is no surer sign of deterioration of character than contentment with inferior work.

We are accustomed to speak of our work as a vocation or calling. Let every man, says the Apostle, abide in the calling in which he was called. Some are called to be servants, some to be masters; some to administer five talents, others one; but every man is as much called of God to his life-work as the minister is called to preach, or the physician to combat disease. Do you expect these to be above the questions of dollars and cents, there is the same obligation on yourself. Would you think it mean of the servant of God to preach at half or quarter power if he were to receive but a trifling solatium, or to cease preaching if he shall have realized a competence? But are you not guilty of similar meanness if, in altered conditions, you permit your conduct to be affected by sordid considerations? Some men are called to sweep chimneys, and others to be archbishops, but in the sight of the Almighty there may be less inequality than we suppose; and the sweep will stand highest at last, if he has driven the soot out of the intricacies of old chimneys with more eager care and with nobler purpose than the archbishop has administered his diocese.

What counts in God's sight is not the work we do, but the way in which we do it. Two men may work side by

side in the same factory or store: the one, at the end of the day, shall have put in a solid block of gold, silver, and precious stones; whilst the other has contributed to the fabric of his life-work an ephemeral, insubstantial addition of wood, hay, and stubble, destined to be burnt. What is the difference between these two? To the eye of man, there is none; to the eye of God, much: because the one has been animated, in the lowliest, commonest actions, by the lofty motive of pleasing God, and doing the day's work thoroughly and well; whilst the other wrought to escape blame, to secure the commendation of man, or to win a large wage. Never be ashamed of honest toil, of labors, however trivial or menial, which you can execute beneath the inspiration of noble aims; but be ashamed of the work which, though it makes men hold their breath in wonder, yet, in your heart, you know to have emanated from earthly, selfish, and ignoble aims.

What we make, makes us. The slight gauze on which the mantle of the incandescent light is formed flares away in a moment, but the solid fabric wrought on it by chemical agents will be luminous for a thousand hours. So the things we make in the world pass away as a wreath of flame, but the motives with which we do them go to make ourselves for better or worse. If you do your work in slovenliness, you become a sloven. If you do your work perfunctorily, you become a hypocrite. If you work only for the eye of man, the sense of God will die out of your life.

Men fret, for instance, at being tied to a clerk's desk. Surely, they say, any one could direct these envelopes, copy these letters, cast up these interminable columns; and in their contempt for their life-work they fail to see that its very unimportance is giving them a better opportunity of cultivating punctuality, patience, fidelity, and similar passive virtues, than they would have if they played a more conspicuous part in the world's life, or in spheres where certain other considerations nerve to supreme efforts, which, in their case, can only be called forth by lofty principle.

At the end of life's brief day we shall be rewarded, not according to the work we have done, but to the faithfulness with which we have endeavored to do our duty, in whatever sphere. Let us live and work with that day in view; and let us never forget that the ultimate reward for conspicuous service will be given not to the one who seemed, to the eye of man, to render it, but to those also who enabled him to render it.

The servant who prepares my food, or saves me the necessity of doing the many duties of my home, thus setting me free to write, or preach, or minister to men, will, in God's reckoning, be credited with no inconsiderable share of the results of anything which may have been achieved through my endeavors. The great deed that blesses the race seems to be wrought by one, but it is really the result of the contributed quotas of scores and hundreds of unnamed and unnoticed workers; and these, in so far as they entered into the spirit of his labors, shall share the reward. Those that sow and those that reap shall rejoice together.

This is the way to do a good day's work. Begin it with God; do all in the name of the Lord Jesus and for the glory of God; count nothing common or unclean in itself-- it can only be so when the motive of your life is low. Be not content with eye-service, but as servants of God do everything from the heart, and for his "Well done." Ask him to kindle and maintain in your heart the loftiest motives; and be as men that watch for the coming of the Master of the house.