

First Things First

Samuel Logan Brengle:

One of the outstanding ironies of history is the utter disregard of ranks and titles in the final judgments men pass upon each other. And if this be so of men, how much more must it be so of the judgments of God.

Nero and Marcus Aurelius sat upon the throne of Rome clothed with absolute power and worshipped as gods, but what a difference! Nero, a monster of iniquity and utter cruelty, execrated of all men Aurelius, a vigorous administrator and benign philosopher, writing meditations which the wise and learned still delight to read and ponder and which, after two millenniums, are a guide to safe and useful living.

Washington and Napoleon were two great statesmen and military leaders. But what a difference! One a ruthless conqueror, building a glittering and evanescent empire on an ocean of blood, dying an exile on a lonely isle with a character for heartless selfishness which sinks lower and yet lower every year in the estimation of all right thinking men. The other refusing a crown, but laying the firm foundations of a State destined to be infinitely greater than Napoleon's empire, and dying at last honored by his former foes, with a character above reproach, revered and beloved of all men.

John and Judas were two Apostles. But what a difference! One was a devil betraying his master with a kiss for a paltry handful of silver, and getting to himself a name that is a synonym for all infamy and treachery. The other pillowed his head on the Master's bosom, and with wide, open eyes was permitted to look deep into Heaven, behold the great white throne and Him that sat upon it, the worshipping angel-hosts, the innumerable multitudes of the redeemed, the glory of the Lamb that was slain, and the face of the everlasting Father; while his name became a synonym for reverence and adoring love.

This summing up and final estimate of men shows that history cares not an iota for the rank and title a man has borne or the office he has held, but only for the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart.

The haughty patricians of Rome doubtless passed by with contemptuous indifference or scorn as the scarred, hooked-nose Jewish prisoner, Paul, with sore eyes and wearied feet, went clanking by in chains to the dungeon, but their names have perished, while his name is enshrined in millions of hearts and embalmed in colleges, in cathedrals and cities, and libraries of books are reverently written about his character, his sufferings, and his work.

Who remembers the Lord Bishops of England in Bunyan's day? But what unnumbered Christian hearts have turned with tears of deepest gratitude and tenderest affection and sympathy to the humble, joyous, inspired tinker, who, from the filthy, verminous Bedford jail, sent forth his immortal story of Pilgrim fleeing from the city of Destruction, and with hopes and fears, and tears and prayers, and sighs, and songs, pressing on over hills of difficulty, through sloughs of despond, past bewitching bowers of beguiling temptations and giants of despair and castles of doubt, till at last he beholds the delectable mountains, views not far away the city of the great King, hears the music of celestial harpers harping on their harps of gold, and, passing through the swelling river, is received with glad welcome on the other shore!

These men whom history acclaims, posterity reveres, and God crowns are the **MEN WHO PUT FIRST THINGS FIRST.**

To no living men and women is it more important than to us of The Salvation Army, that first things should have first place always in all our thoughts and plans, our affections, and activities.

And what shall be first with us? Many hands stretch out toward us, and many voices plead with us for first place. Which shall have the primacy? Which shall have our last thoughts when falling asleep at night and our first thoughts on awaking in the morning?

There are many things that make so subtle and apparently so reasonable an appeal, that if we do not watch and pray and keep in the Spirit, they will without right usurp first place, and we shall some day wake up and find that we have been bowing down to an idol instead of the living God.

I. We may put our work first. Is it not commanded, 'Do with thy might what thy hands find to do'? And are we not exhorted to be 'not slothful in business'? And are we not assured that 'a man diligent in his business shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men'? Is not our work God's work? And can anything equal it in importance? Are we not warned that if we are careless we shall be cursed? If we are slothful, our talent

shall be taken from us, given to another, and we ourselves cast out into outer darkness as wicked and slothful servants, where we shall fruitlessly weep and gnash our teeth. Is not our work the building of God's kingdom on earth, the rescue of men from sin and its eternal woe? Yes, yes, yes, it is all that, and no words can express the infinity of its importance. But it must not have first place. If it does, we ourselves shall be lost. 'Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Thy name? and in Thy name have cast out devils? and in Thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you.' Solemn words these, spoken by the Master.

Many years ago I was billeted with one of the most brilliant and capable Staff Officers I have known. We had had a great Meeting that night and got to bed late and wearied, but, according to my custom, I was up early next morning, seeking God, reading my Bible, and praying. The blessing of the Lord came upon me and I burst into tears. My comrade woke up and found me praying, weeping, rejoicing. He was much moved, and confessed to me that he did not often realize that he had found God when praying, and explained that he was so busy, so pressed with his work, so absorbed and fascinated with it, that when he prayed his mind wandered to things he should do during the day, and so he seldom got into real touch and fellowship with God. I earnestly warned him of the danger this meant to his own soul and eventually to his work, the dryness and spiritual barrenness that must come upon him if, through the multiplicity of cares and the pressure of work, God was crowded out or pushed into the background of his life. He admitted the truth of all I said, but he still put his work first. He rose rapidly in rank and important command, then suddenly dropped out of The Army over some trifling matter, and has long been dead. Did his exceptionally bright and promising career end in darkness because he failed to put first things first? I have feared so.

2. It is possible for an Officer to so far lose sight of first things that he comes at last to do much if not all his work with an eye to his own promotion and his future career. He may become embittered toward his leaders and jealous toward his comrades if he is not promoted as rapidly as others, or if his appointments do not correspond to what he or his wife considers his merits. It is a most subtle danger, and through it many an Officer's splendid spiritual career has come to an end, while he still went on in a perfunctory performance of his official duties, beating time, moving but not progressing, doing no vital and lasting work for God and souls; of whom it could be written, 'Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.' I have met Officers who spent more time repining and complaining and inwardly rebelling about not being promoted than they did in studying and working and fitting themselves for the work that promotion would thrust upon them. 'For men to search their own glory, is not glory,' wrote Solomon, but such men quite overlook such texts as that, and while they may attain the desire of their heart, they miss the glory that God gives.

Personally, an awful fear has shaken me at times in the thought that a man may get in this world all the honor and glory that he seeks, and find in the next world that there is nothing further coming to him, like a man who draws his salary in advance and at the end of the week or month or year has nothing to receive. Abraham said to the rich man 'Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things'; and there was nothing due to him in that new world to which his soul had been so suddenly snatched away. He had not put first things first, and he who proudly scorned the poor beggar Lazarus at his gate now found himself an eternal pauper and beggar in Hell.

3. An Officer may gradually put his family first. It has been said that until forty-five a man says, 'What can I do to advance myself?' After forty-five he says, 'What can I do to provide for and advance my children?' But to an Officer this may become a deadly snare. Sometimes it is the wife and mother whose ambition or anxiety overrides the sober judgment of the father and husband, and he bends before her insistence and falls from his splendid integrity and devotion to God's cause. Oh, the pity of it! 'He that loveth son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me,' said Jesus.

4. A man may put his own culture first. This is not a widespread danger among us, and yet it may become to some a very subtle danger. Study, reading, travel, the cultivation of the mind and the gratifying of taste, may lead to the neglect of God's work and the drying up of the fountains of spiritual power. Personal culture is not to be despised, but rather coveted. The better informed, the wiser and more cultivated we are, provided we are dedicated wholly to God and set on fire with spiritual passion, the more effectually can we glorify God and serve our fellow-men. It is true that 'God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; the weak things of the world to confound the mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.' But He also chose Moses, educated in all the learning of Egypt -- Moses, the most cultured man of his age; and Paul, educated at the universities of Tarsus and Jerusalem, for the great work of the ages. Not many such has God chosen, because not often do such cultured men choose Christ and the Cross. But God can and does use culture, when dedicated wholly to His service, and we should not despise it,

but covet it and take every legitimate opportunity to secure it. But woe to the man who puts it first in his thought and effort. God will laugh at him and pass him by and give his crown to some little illiterate nobody who loves, and trusts, and shouts, and sings, and knows nothing among men but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and counts not his life dear unto himself that he may win the souls for whom the Saviour died.

If we would put first things first, we must be ready at any moment to lay aside our books, our music, our studies, our business, our own pleasure and profit, to save souls.

The Founder, on the train in Switzerland, was writing an article when members of his Staff called him to look at the Alps towering upward into the blue heavens, gleaming in white, majestic splendor, but his heart and mind were so absorbed with his work and the greater splendors of the spirit, and of redeeming love, that he would hardly lift his eyes from the work in which he was lost. Again and again I have had to practice this kind of stern self-denial in my world travels if I would keep first things first.

Museums which house the symbols of a nation's history and the products of its genius and labor are a medium of culture. I once spent two weeks within two or three stone-throws of one of Europe's national museums, and passing it on several occasions, longed to run in and spend some time among its strange and ancient treasures. But a mighty work of the Spirit was going on, my time was short, and hungry souls so thronged me, both in the Meetings and between Meetings, that I had to deny them or deny myself the pleasure and instruction I might have found in that treasure-house of science and art and natural wonders. To some it might have made no appeal. To me it did, but it was denied in order that first things might have first place, and any regret for my loss is swallowed up in the joy of my greater gain and the gain of those precious souls to whom I ministered.

This demand that first things shall have first place in The Army and in religion is not simply a demand of the spiritual life, but of all life, of every profession and activity. The soldier must not entangle himself with the secular affairs of life. The lawyer must make law his mistress and give her his full devotion. The physician must put the profession of healing before all business or pleasure. The student must deny himself and hold everything secondary to his studies. The true lover must forsake all others for her who is enshrined in his heart's best affections.

What, then, shall be first in our thoughts, our affections, our life? That must be first, the loss of which is the loss of all. To lose God is the sum of all loss. If we lose Him we lose all. If we lose all and still have Him, we shall in Him again find all. 'What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ,' wrote Paul. 'Yea, doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ, . . . for whom I have suffered the loss of all things.' And yet this poor man, persecuted, hated, hunted, stripped of all things, cries out to his brothers in like poverty: 'All things are yours; whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours, and ye are Christ's, and Christ is God's.' Hallelujah!

'Seek ye Me, and ye shall live,' is God's everlasting plea to you and me.

'Uzziah sought God' -- and as long as he sought the Lord, God made him to prosper -- 'he was marvelously helped, till he was strong. But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction, for he transgressed against the Lord his God.'

In these words what a grim, revealing glimpse we have down the long, dim vista of three millenniums into the secret of that old king's glory and doom! And 'they are written for our admonition upon whom the ends of the world are come.'

Many years ago I heard the Founder, in an impassioned plea to his people to wait on God, cry out, 'Men are losing God every day, and I should lose Him if out of my busy life I did not take time every day to seek His face.' And in a letter quoted by Harold Begbie, he wrote: 'I wish I could have a little more time for meditation on eternal things. I must not let my soul get dried up with secular affairs, even though they concern the highest earthly interests of my fellows. After all, soul matters are of infinite importance and are really most closely concerned with earthly advantages.' If it was so with King Uzziah and with our revered Founder, it is so with us, O my comrades! These men, though dead, yet speak to us; and though they came back to us as Dives besought Abraham that Lazarus might come back with warning to his brethren, yet they could have no other message, they could not speak otherwise. They have spoken their final word, and to me, at least, it is the word of the Lord.

'When thou saidst, Seek ye My face; my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek,' wrote the Psalmist.

First Things First

Thou, O Christ, art all I want,

More than all in Thee I find.

Let us pray!