

THE GREATEST THIEF IN MINOT

Sermon preached in Vincent Methodist Episcopal Church, Minot, N. D., at a Crowded House, by the Pastor, Rev. G. L. Powell, Ph. D., on Sunday Night, March 18, 1906. Stenographically Reported, and Published by Request.

Who is it? What is it? You will find the text in the Acts of the Apostles, 24th chapter, and the last part of the 25th verse: "Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee." The whole verse reads thus: "And so he reasoned of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come, Felix trembled and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee."

I heard an eminent educator say that environment—on which Spencerian philosophy places so much emphasis—is all supreme in human life. Now, doctors differ, great minds differ, and small minds differ too, and this small mind differs from the great mind of the educator who spoke recently in our city and laid emphasis on environment or surroundings. I agree in part, of course, but yet differ in part with that statement, for I believe this—that there is in life an all-supreme moral or spiritual dynamic, that makes man master of his surroundings, makes man control his circumstances, makes conditions bend to his will; and instead of having circumstances, conditions, surroundings, environment supreme, you have man himself standing in the history of the ages as all supreme and all important. Paul is an illustration of this thought. He had been accused by his enemies of raising up a sedition, and a certain man by the name of Tertullus had been hired by the Jews to accuse Paul; and if you will read the 24th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles you will find that this man was a great orator. I suppose the Jews thought that if they could throw the glamour of oratory about the occasion, Paul would succumb and they would silence the leader of the despised sect called "the Nazarenes," but they reckoned without their host. For not only was Tertullus an orator but Paul was one also, and we find him possessing real genuine oratory and logic and mental fire, rivaling those qualities which the Roman orator possessed; and so much did Paul show his mastery of circumstances, that he was a conqueror of environment and had it under his heel, that the man representing the imperial power of Rome, Felix, and his unprincipled paramour Drucilla, trembled. So much, I repeat, did Paul have circumstances, environment, under his control that the power of Rome represented in Felix, trembled, wavered and shook. When Paul reasoned of righteousness, temperance and judgment to come, the man all supreme, in Palestine in that day, trembled before Paul's mighty words and said, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee."

Now, what is the greatest thief in Minot? The name is given by implication in our text. Procrastination. What is the greatest thief in North Dakota? Procrastination. What is the greatest thief in the United States? Procrastination. What is the greatest thief on this American continent? Procrastination. Why, just one instance will prove that it is. Go back to history, when Queen Elizabeth was dying, she gave expression to an utterance that has come down to us to-day as a warning, and by which Elizabeth will never be forgotten, namely, "A million of money for a moment of time." Procrastination not only steals a man's money, it steals his opportunities, steals his privileges, steals the dearest things of life. Procrastination steals a man's present and it mortgages a man's future and claims it, too. It has been truly called the "Thief of Time," and I would like to add another title and call it the "Murderer of Souls," for it is the primal cause, exceeding all other causes, of the murder of millions of men and women living in Christian lands. Murderer of souls art thou, Procrastination!

Deliberate rejection of Christ is very rare. I have found very few men in my short life who will deliberately reject the Lord Jesus. I once came across a man I thought the spirit of God had left forever. He was dying of consumption, and when I spoke to him about his end he looked at me with a cynical smile and said, "Oh, I am not going to be present at my own funeral." I was silenced. I didn't know what to think of the hardness of heart of a man so near the grave, who would look into the face of a poor fellow who had come to speak to him about his soul—and he belonged to the "upper ten" of the town, and his parents were active in church work—and, with an almost sardonic smile, say, "I am not going to be present at my own funeral." I left with him a book, "The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life," and within 48 hours that man had become gloriously converted. When I went to him two days afterwards that smile had passed away, and upon his face was a heavenly radiance almost, a joy unspeakable, not to be painted by any words of mine. Deliberate rejection of Christ is very rare, but it is very common to hear men say, to the question, "Why do you not accept the Lord Jesus as your Savior?" "Not to-night," or, in the historic words of old Felix, the Roman Governor of Palestine uttered two thousand years or so ago, "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee."

Let me show you that this procrastination, this putting off of the claims of God upon the human heart, is a thief, the worst thief, the greatest thief in all Minot and in all the land.

Let me show you that procrastination is a rogue, an historic rogue, and it is astounding that men and women who reflect; men and women who are intellectually keen, alive, always on the qui vive, and yet when it comes to reflection upon the great eternal interests of the soul they seem to be so undecided, so uncertain, so—so words fail me. It is amazing to I think of men, keen, logical, business-like, judicial, considering both pro and con, putting one against another, coming to an intelligent, masterful conclusion in other matters, but when it comes to matters of the soul, they are undecided or rather, they decide against their best interests.

In the first place I remark that procrastination helps a man to deceive himself. Don't you despise a deceiver? For instance, I once went into my aunt's house and I had a pair of shoes on that I had bought for myself that were a little large. My aunt looked at them and said, "You have a nice pair of boots on," and I said, "Yes, but they are a mile too long." She said, "Gideon, I thought you were a Christian. That's a lie." I replied, "It is not, it is only an hyperbolic expression! The essence of a lie is in its deception. Now, if I gave you to understand that the boots were paid for when they were not, that would be a lie." She said, "That is not so; what you said was a lie," and I answered, "Then I am in good company," and I opened the Bible and read these words of the Psalmist: "Let the floods clap their hands; let the hills be joyful together." Whoever heard of floods that had hands, and if they did, of their clapping them? When you use a hyperbolic expression there is no deception in it. The lie that is acted is a white lie, the worst kind of a lie; and I accuse Procrastination tonight of being the greatest Thief in Minot because of its deception. It has been deceiving some of you for the last twenty years, perhaps, and others for the last five years. Procrastination deceives a man when it says, "Not yet, not yet, it will be all right some day." Now, you don't intend to finally reject the Lord Jesus Christ, but you must enjoy life, and you must be rich, there is plenty of time for you to become a Christian. Hear me! That is the essence of deception, and I believe in my very soul that if the unconverted men and women in this congregation believed that they had sinned away the day of grace—that there was no hope of Heaven for them—you would be the most miserable, the most unhappy persons in this city; and furthermore, I believe that the very thought would drive you to insanity. Yes, if you thought that the day of grace had been forever sinned away, that there was no salvation for you, that you would be lost through all eternity, the very thought would take such a deep hold upon your convictions that you would become insane. Once a young man left home, but before he took his departure his mother gave him a Bible, and marked this text, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you."

The reason why a great many men do not succeed is because they begin at the wrong end. Make a partner of God in your business, and if the Bible is true, you are sure to succeed. The young fellow said, "No, mother, when I get rich I will become a Christian." The first Sunday away from home, as was his custom, he went to church and the minister preached from that text. During the week he wandered around and the next Sunday he went to another church and the preacher preached from the same text. He made up his mind he would not go to church, and for years he absented himself from the house of God, and when he did go he heard a third minister preach from the same text. The years passed, his mother died, and after the death of his mother he began to think about his life. He was still trying to get rich, and was no richer than when he left home. Why? He began at the wrong end. And so he made up his mind he would go to church and try to become a Christian. When, some time later, he met Mr. Moody he said, "Mr. Moody, I tried, I have been trying these years, but my heart is as hard as a stone. I have no feeling and no desire. I would give the world if I could become a Christian, but I cannot. The thought crossed upon my mind until he became insane and was taken to the asylum, and everybody who went there after that was met by the lunatic pointing his finger heavenward and repeating, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." The thought had burned itself into his soul. Mr. Moody visited him a few days before he died, and he uttered the same words, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you." He died a lunatic and he was buried in a lunatic's grave. Men! Men who think! Do you mean to tell me that you will blame an end like that upon the God of Heaven? Do you mean to tell me that Providence had anything to do with that man's insanity? Never! That man was deceived; he never accepted Christ; he was buried in a lunatic's grave. Beware men! But you say, "I am not like that." No, not now, but you may be some day! Procrastination comes to you and says, "that is sensible—keep on." Hear me! Because you have the idea that some day you are going to turn over a new leaf, your present rejection of the Lord Jesus does not appear to you, but your present rejection and your giving the guidance of your life into the hands of a Thief, show your unspeakable baseness and ingratitude. Being blinded by the God of this world, the present baseness of your rejection of salvation does not appear.

In the second place I remark that not only does Procrastination, or the "Thief of Time," imply deception, but it supposes two things: First, that another opportunity will certainly be given. "A convenient season, not tonight, some other time." Secondly, it supposes that the heart will be as ready to accept Christ afterwards as now. That is the second implication of Procrastination. If these two propositions or suppositions are not tolerably true, Procrastination is sheer madness, for no sane man would throw away his one chance of life.

First: Is not life proverbially insecure? Listen to the Bible! Job, the 14th chapter and first and second verses: "Man that is born of woman, is of few days, and full of trouble. He cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down; he fleeth also like a shadow, and continueth not." Man a shadow! The old Canaanite Job, in speaking of the brevity of life compares it to a shadow. "If fleeth as a shadow, and continueth not." And coming down through the centuries James says: "Whereas, ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and the vanisheth away." And every time you stand at the grave side of a friend and hear the Methodist or Episcopal services repeated, what do you hear? "In the midst of life we are in death." Is life secure? Is it? Is it? Men, if this life is so secure, why do you have your life insured? Every man who has no money or property behind him ought to have his life insured. Men know that there are a good many men who are opposed to life insurance. I once preached to a fraternal Order and a man—a man that you could depend on, every inch of him—a royal man, I call him—one of the Lord's aristocrats on earth—that man wouldn't come to the service because I was going to preach to an organization that believed in life insurance. I want to say this: If I didn't have my life insured I think I would be a criminal. My life is uncertain. A wife and children are behind me who will have to pay one hundred cents on the dollar if they should be taken alone. Men! think! And then you will see that every man who has the responsibilities of a home devolving upon him ought to have his life insured. You may be called to exchange worlds at any moment. Why do men insure their lives? Because they don't know the moment they are going to be called away. I reiterate, Is life secure? Where are your chums? Where are your classmates? Before coming to this church I went over my life and passed in review the companions of my youth. Where was James? Gone. Where was Hezekiah? Gone. Where was Willie? Gone. Where are all the girls who were with me in school? They are gone. Typhoid fever, consumption, and other diseases, have taken them away, and some of them are lying in solitary graves away from home—one young fellow down in Pittsburg, two or three others in British Columbia yonder. My classmates are lying all over the world, some of them down there in South Africa even. Where are yours? They are gone. Is life secure? Oh, no! And yet men are saying, "Not to-night; Not to-night." "A convenient season!" And, secondly, supposing the convenient season should come, will you be as ready to accept Christ ten years from now as you are tonight? Iron when heated and allowed to gradually cool is harder afterwards than it was before. Is it not so with the human heart? There is no man who has not been sometimes blessed with feelings and longings and desires after God. Such may be your case now. Do you not know that sometimes these feelings never come back. Consider the awful risk you are running by putting off the salvation of the soul to a convenient season. Consider the awful risk! If death don't come you may have another chance.

but if death does come the man unsaved is ruined beyond recovery. This procedure of postponing salvation to an opportune occasion is not a practical problem; it is not workable. Men do not proceed in business upon that principle. Do you think there is a man in this city who would freight his whole fortune upon a single ship? No, because if that ship were wrecked that man may become penniless. Do you think there is a man in this city who would risk all his money in a single speculation no matter how likely to succeed it may appear? No! Do you think there is a man in this congregation, or in Minot, who would risk his all on the chances of a gambling table? No! A thousand times, No! And yet I make this awful statement that every unsaved man and woman, every man and woman who have not accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior, is a gambler and the most awful thing in the universe is the state of a man who is risking his Eternal all on a single chance upon the gambling table.

Oh, man, prudent in all else, why are you so reckless in this matter? Cautious and calculating when dollars are at stake, why are you so mad when the interests of your soul are in the balance? "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul, or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" The world is more than money. It means fame; it means popularity; it means power; it means glory; it means diadems; it means thrones; it means everything that the heart loves today, and yet Jesus Christ put a single soul in the balance, and says: "that outweighs the whole world, with all its possessions." "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the world and lose his own soul?" You that are unsaved think of it.

God help us to beware of this Thief, for the saddest words—Hear me, men!—the saddest words that echo and reverberate through the chasms of eternal darkness are these, "It might have been." "It might have been." There is a sentimentality abroad, and you have every Tom, Dick and Harry who understands a little Greek or Hebrew, and others also who know nothing of these languages, prating and saying, "there is no hell, and, if there is a hell, God is too merciful to shut man up in it forever." I am not prepared to say whether hell is literal torment or not, and I have read deeply along this line. I have taken my Greek Testament and have gone through it, and I want to say this: the same language that speaks of the everlasting glory of the redeemed, speaks also of the everlasting punishment of the lost; and it you eliminate the words, "eternal" or "everlasting," from the punishment of the lost, you must also eliminate them from the joy of the blessed. These shall go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into life eternal." Both words are used in the Greek. And let me say, I believe in hell. I believe in it on the authority of Jesus Christ, and that place which differentiates the good from the bad is the worst possible place in the universe; and if God's presence constitutes heaven, the absence of God constitutes hell, and the very thought of the possibility of a man finding himself in that place somewhere in all the universe of God, separated from all that is good, pure, holy and God-like; separated forever in darkness and blackness; and crying, "It might have been different," might have been saved, but lost, lost, ought to be sufficient to deter us from farther quibbling and trifling with the salvation of our souls.

Men, be wise, be true to the old Bible. Conquer your surroundings. Begin to-night to live for God. I stretch out my hand and give it to you. Will you extend yours? Take the hand of the preacher, a man who loves you, a man who believes in the eternal verities of the Word of God, and clasp mine and say, "Brother, stranger or friend, I will accept the Lord Jesus, by the grace of God, and I will slap the Thief in the face, and I will meet you somewhere, in the eternities to come, in the city of God. Do that in your heart of hearts, and angels will rejoice, and Heaven will be yours forever."

Ward County's State Taxes.

The Independent took the trouble to look up the amount of the state taxes paid by Ward county for each year since 1897. The figures are interesting and are as follows: 1897, \$4692.87; 1898, \$6137.62; 1899, \$7683.23; 1900, \$8616.17; 1901, \$15,377.96; 1902, \$15,804.07; 1903, \$24,070.20; 1904, \$30,665.16. In this connection it might be said that the tax list of 1897, had the benefit of eight years' collections, while the others have had less, and less time, until the 1905 tax list had the collection of but one month.

The number of tax receipts for 1905 issued up to Feb. 28, was 10652, while 7013 were issued in February alone.

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Ward County Schools Are Rich.

The following figures will serve as a comparison which will show the development of Ward county's educational system. The amount of money apportioned to Ward county schools for the quarter ending February 28, was \$6726.44. The amount apportioned from the county tuition taxes and school poll for the same purposes, was \$5977.21, making a total of \$12,703.65. The amount is divided between 102 districts and 8054 pupils.

Five years ago the total apportionment both from county and state amounted to but \$3955.12.



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