

GS325

“NOTHING BUT LEAVES.”*

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A LEAF is one of the most beautiful and wonderful objects in nature. It fulfils the double mission of grace and use. Just what the lungs are to man and animals, *that* the leaves are to the trees and shrubs. Vegetable equally with animal life depends upon and progresses by processes of respiration. We loosen and fertilize the soil about the roots of the tree, in order to push on its growth; yet, with all our pains, we do but a small part of the work. The silent leaves above us, opening a thousand mouths on every branch, are the great feeders of fertility. All the day long, under the quickening chemistry of light and heat, they eliminate and breathe *in* the

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healthy oxygen from the air, that vitalizes the sap, and spreads beauty and strength to every fibre and cell—and all the night they breathe *out* the waste and refuse carbon. Tender and fragile as they are, veined more delicately than an infant's hand, seeming to cling so timidly to bough and twig; yet without them trunk and branch would wither and stand the dreary skeletons of the life that had perished. But over and above their purposes of use, what grace and goodliness they give to nature, what marvellous varieties of form and size and shade they exhibit! Look at them in spring time, when they are coming out timidly one by one; in that fresh exquisite green attire, quickening the throbbings of every heart with their hints of life. Look at them in the thick-leaved splendor of June, when, massed and matted, they darken the ground with their cool and grateful shadow; or watch them in autumn, when frost and ripeness fire the trees, and they flame gorgeous illuminations to swell the splendor of the triumphant march of harvest; and in all their shifting phases alike they rejoice the eyes, and give warmth and color to the most unimpressive nature.

Yet the leaves of a tree once called forth the condemnation and the curse of Christ. Matt. 21:19. Walking with his disciples, he saw at a distance a fig-tree. In tropical countries, the broad and luxuriant foliage of this tree makes it a notable object in the landscape. Weary and faint, they hastened towards it, and stood under its shade; beneath its spreading branches they found shelter from the burning heat. Had it been dry and leafless, he would have passed it by; but standing there full clothed in the splendor of Syrian summer, every bough quick with life, the processes of growth pushing on—*because* of its very appearance and seeming perfectness he cursed it, so that presently it withered away.

Because he found thereon "nothing but leaves!" Men plant fruit trees, not for *foliage*, but for *fruit*. A leaf is not the last and highest result of growth, but only an intermediate product of the process, meant to be a help to the perfect consummation. It was *food* that Christ was seeking, and not shade. It was high time that it should be found. The fig appears before the leaf. That such a tree should be barren at such a season was sure

proof that it was a failure, so far as the highest end of its existence was concerned; and so, though it stood out a thing of beauty, broad branched, thick leaved, still because it bore "*nothing but leaves*," Christ condemned it, that it might be a type and warning to generations to come, that lack of fruit-bearing is a sin against God, however attractive or promising a profession and life may be.

And yet how many systems of faith and practice, accepted by multitudes and commended with unmeasured praise, after all bear "*nothing but leaves*." Every thoughtful man admits the legitimacy of this test of fruitfulness. He has no hope that a barren theory will win its way in the world. He hastens to show, when he urges his scheme upon you, what it *has* done and what it *can* do. We judge of systems as we do of seeds, which will give us the fullest ears and the most abundant harvests. But men often fail to discriminate clearly between leaf and fruit. It is contended sometimes by the advocates of an amended gospel and a liberal creed, that the forth-puttings of that system are its all-sufficient verification. We are pointed to the eloquent orators, the elegant scholars, the

graceful poets it produces. But eloquence and scholarship and poetry are “nothing but leaves.” *Holiness of heart* is the true fruit of a real gospel; the clusters ripened by the grace of God hang higher than the growths of intellect.

We are pointed to the earnest sympathy with man fostered by this genial faith, to its varied philanthropic schemes for the betterment of the laboring classes, for the reclamation of the vicious, for the rescue of the down-trodden and oppressed; but all these things, worthy as they are, are in comparison “nothing but leaves.” The ripe fruit of genuine spiritual faith is *salvation*—a power that not merely ministers to bodily necessities or constrains to outward proprieties of conduct, but a power that goes deeper and does more thorough work—that purifies and renovates and sanctifies the soul. All else but this is as nothing. To mature this royal harvest the councils of eternity were set. For this, prophet and apostle were anointed with Chrism divine. For this, Jesus wept and suffered and died. For this, the Holy Ghost, the Comforter, came, and comes and strives. For this, all powers of holy growth for ever struggle;

and any system, however great its triumphs in other directions, that cannot show regenerate souls as its fruits, let it boast as it may, its best results are "nothing but leaves."

It is with the single soul, however, that this truth has the most to do; it has an eminently practical bearing on the individual well-being. Let every man take such care of himself that he shall be genuinely fruitful, and it matters little about systems. And this is the great end of our creation. God has put you and me into this world, not to amass fortunes, not to win great names, not to live easily and pleasantly, with as little trouble as possible, but to glorify him; and "herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit." And yet most men drive on, as if the great object in life was to bear "nothing but leaves"—to enlarge one's social influence, to reach a higher social position, to multiply possessions. For things like these nine-tenths of human energy is expended. We are more anxious about the quantity than the quality of our growth; we forget the one set purpose of our life. There are but few who so seclude themselves from the thrill and stir of the great multitude, that they hear with distinctness God's message to

their souls. We live in a thronged and busy world. We breathe its feverish air; we catch the contagion of its enthusiasms and hopes. We look at its prizes through the bewildering glare of sense. We wish not strangely, to be and do as other men, and so we forget that, in spite of the clamor and roar that fill the spiritual ear, a voice is sounding all the day, “Son—daughter, go work in my vineyard.” The great end of life is mistaken, the powers and possibilities given for holy and lasting use are employed in unworthy ways, and for inferior ends, and we come to the end of our years, be they many or few, to find at the last, and too late, that all our toilsome probation has borne for us “nothing but leaves.”

It is of the first importance, therefore, for the wise conduct of life, that a man should recognize his true mission as a fruit-bearer. It is essential to economical and successful labor that the task should be accurately defined. Half the work in the world is wasted, because men strike at hap-hazard. They have no specific aim, only a vague and general desire to “get on.” The great apostle gave the rule of success in any direction when

he said, "I so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one who beateth the air." Thrust a magnet into a heap of metallic particles, and at once they assume set and crystalline forms. And distinctness of purpose has a magnetic power. It brings into proper position and play every force that can bear upon the end to be obtained. It utilizes latent energies, and originates combinations of powers, and works every thing at full pressure, and with all the might of an unconquerable will presses on to triumph.

Witness in proof of this the methods in which men of the world win their victories. Let a man make up his mind, like Girard, to be rich, and see how that determination works for him. Every thing else is held subordinate to that end. Body and soul become mere slaves to that over-mastering purpose. Hunger presses him, but he will not yield to appetite any further than is needful to get strength to make money. Pleasure woos him, but he turns away from all its enchantments; there is no "money" to be made by self-gratification. Taste urges its claim, but it cannot be heeded, for it takes instead of makes money to satisfy it. He walks abroad, but it is not

to breathe the sweet air, nor gladden the eyes with the wonders of a world of beauty, but only to see where some new "dollar" may be found. Every thing he is, or has, or does strains towards the same end; and that passionate enthusiasm, laughing at obstacles, presses on till it grasps the prize for which it has dared and done all. There is no power like the might of a great determination. Nothing less than Divine can match it. When a thousand wires are welded into one, they forge the Damascus steel, that can divide the gossamer or cut the iron bar asunder; and when all the energies of a man are molten into one force by the potent heat of purpose, they shape a blade invincible by aught but the flashing sword of Almightyness.

Let a man then live, first and most of all, from the thought that his work in the world is to bring forth fruit to the honor and glory of God: that whatever else is left undone, *this must be done*; that however promising a project, it is to be rejected if it interferes with the sovereign purpose. Let a man live so, and spiritual success is sure. For whatever power determination has in other departments, it is intensified in this. By special aids God

speeds the purpose of righteousness to fulfilment. The best laid human schemes sometimes miscarry by reason of perils and hindrances that no man could foresee. But along the track we travel to do thy will, O God, there are no hidden reefs to wreck our ships, no billows to engulf them, no tempests to beat them back. The earnest soul journeys along a safe and sure highway, over which "the ransomed of the Lord come to Mount Zion with songs, and everlasting joy upon their heads."

If you and I, then, are so conscious of our high vocation, and so faithful, that we make this determination the supreme law of life, we may reasonably expect that our labor will ripen abundant fruit. Not necessarily *marvels* of growth. It is a vice of human nature that it cannot be satisfied unless it can do some *wonderful* thing. Every man sets out to be a great man, but very few get much farther than the start.

This spirit besets us from the earliest years. The child poring over the wonderful romances that form the mental food of his first days, longs for the time when he shall go out to slay giants and capture castles. The youth looks contemptuously upon the routine of

daily life as too commonplace for his abilities; and as men get on to maturer years, do they quite forget to build castles in the clouds, whose splendor puts to shame the common walls in which they live and work? The desire is all well in its way, but the trouble is, it keeps us dreaming when we should be working, and too often makes us discontented and disheartened, forgetting that God gives to the seeds of faithful endeavor we sow such a body as pleases him, and to every seed his own body. So long as a man is true to the task which God sets him, let him learn, in whatsoever state he is, therewith to be content. I cannot be the apostle Paul, but I will not worry about that; my sole concern is to ripen the best fruit I may where I am planted. And, moreover, marvels do not make up the bulk of life. The few prodigies of growth which the farmer brings to the agricultural fair, are exceptions not specimens of his harvest. His barns and cellars are filled with something quite different from what is contained in the single basket. The most of both nature and life is made up of what we call commonalties. God never meant that men should be all the time doing wonder-

ful things; if they did, they would cease to be wonderful. We esteem them marvellous simply because they are infrequent; and if you come to the real truth of the matter, those relative epithets, great and small, as we use them, amount to almost nothing. If an apple grows till it measures a foot, we call it a prodigy; but it is not near so much of a prodigy as that the smallest apple should grow at all. The process itself, and not its extent, is the real wonder. The evening prayer lisped by the child is just as really, just as worthily, just as acceptably praise as the triumphant strain from the harp-strings of the seraphim. Your victory over some common temptation is just as wonderful as the rout of the rebellious hosts of heaven. The Christian graces that ripen in your humble life are as great a marvel, and glow as brightly in the sight of God, as the twelve manner of fruits that hang on the tree planted by the crystal river of Paradise. And just this kind of fruit men in every station may bring forth every day.

But my lot in life, you say, is so humble and my experience has so little that is noteworthy, what can I do? Whether ye eat or drink, says the apostle, or whatsoever ye do,

do *all* to the glory of God. Let a man thank God that he can glorify him in common things. Nor let him forget that, in modest walks and unobtrusive ways, he may chance to make the most acceptable offering. When God paints a flaunting lily, he dashes on the rawest of colors; but the little violet is tinted with heaven's own hue. The Alpine strawberry, no larger than a pea, is sweetest of all the fruits of the field. Nature compacts her choicest flavors and colors, and seals them up in the smallest of flasks, and the man who pierces down to the lowest stratum of life, and sanctifies the common word and act, evidences thereby a richer and fuller grace than he who stands up in the pulpit to preach, or sets himself sword in hand at the head of the hosts of some great reform.

As a general rule, rich and rare fruits are ripened slowly. Some of the most eminent forth-puttings of pious growth have been long in maturing. Men have spent years in pushing on silent but patient processes; and because there was no speedy result adequate to the labor, the world said, "Lo, these are barren trees; they bear nothing but leaves." Yet just as the unsightly cactus, bequeathed from

father to son, wearing away the lifetime of three generations, without hint of beauty or use, at last, when the full century is rounded, flowers out into one full consummate blossom, filled with the juices of a hundred years, so at length the fruit of these earnest workers appears. For thirty years Jesus was as a root out of a dry ground, without form or comeliness, till the royal hour of his ripeness struck; and then what age was ever so magnificently blossomed as the brief years of his ministry? What other era of time has borne such fruits as Gethsemane and Calvary? It matters not though men call our lives barren, if with faithful and unwearying culture we are carrying out the plans of the great Husbandman. When God pleases, the harvest long ripening will appear all the more impressive from the unsuspected quiet out of which it has grown.

Almost every life has its crises and turning-points of greater or less magnitude. There are single hours and acts that, like rudders, steer us into wide seas of triumph or misfortune. In their significance and influence they stand solemn and apart from the rest of life. But there is no other so wonderful epoch in a man's history as the time when, after

years of barrenness, or at best “nothing but leaves,” he becomes at last genuinely fruitful. You have read that thrilling story of the broken cable stretched along the ocean’s bed for more than a thousand miles; how “night and day for a whole year the electrician had been watching its tiny signal ray; how sometimes wild, incoherent messages came from the deep, spelt out by magnetic storms and earth currents, till of a sudden, on a morning, the unsteady flickering changed to coherency; and after the long interval that had brought nothing but the moody and delirious mutterings of the sea, stammering over its alphabet in vain, the cable began to speak, and to transmit the appointed signals, which indicated human purpose and method at the other end, instead of the hurried signs, broken speech, and inarticulate cries of the illiterate Atlantic.” But that is a more wonderful hour, when over the living wires of the soul, long speaking in stammering and incoherent phrase, as the earth currents and the storms of sense and sin have uttered themselves, there comes at length the unmistakable pulse of thought and feeling from the Infinite wisdom, and *God* begins to speak through that

soul to men by the signals of holy words and works. The thrill and ecstasy of that hour will never be lost. It will be the bright consummate centre of life, for not two *continents* but two *worlds* are then wedded into one.

How is it with you, my brother? Does Christ, when he comes to you, as he comes daily, find a fruitful life, or "nothing but leaves?" Give heed to the lessons of every autumn hour, that leaves, however fair, soon fall and perish, while the fruit is gathered into garnerers. What provision are you making for the coming time, when the summer shall be passed and the frosts of winter fall? Let you and me strive for lives rich in lasting results, and whatever of help and success we may seek for the furtherance of our cherished plans, still let our supreme prayer be—

Something, my God, for thee,
Something for thee!
That each day's setting sun may bring
Some penitential offering;
In thy dear name some kindness done;
To thy dear love some wanderer won—
Some trial meekly borne,
Dear Lord, for thee!