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The Plough of Spiritual Success.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church, Sabbath evening, Frederickton, Aug 26th., 1888.

"No man having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.—LUKE IX. 62.

Some one had said to our Lord that he would follow Him, but he wanted to go home first and bid his friends farewell. We have no means of knowing who that some one was, perhaps one of the disciples, perhaps the gloomy doubting Thomas, perhaps the loving John. But whoever he was, his request does not strike us as an unreasonable one. The Master, however, was not pleased with it. He saw that the man was hesitating. He was lacking of that decision and determination of character and promptitude of action which are so essential to success. And then his friends were probably not in sympathy with the gospel, and they would be sure to get around him and wear him off from what they would regard as a foolish notion, a mad whim, and that would be the end of his being a christian. Hence, Jesus gave him the somewhat curt reply I am choosing as my text to-night: "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

In that expressive answer our Lord has reference to the calling of Elisha to the prophetic office. Elisha was a young man at home, a young farmer. One day he and eleven others were ploughing on his father's farm at Abelmeholah. They had a yoke of oxen each, and Elisha was the last in the long row of ploughers. Along came the venerable Elijah, a great prophet of the time, and in his strangely abrupt way of doing things he threw his hairy mantle on the brawny shoulders of the young ploughman, and without a word passed on. Of course he had been directed by God to choose the ploughman of Abelmeholah as his successor, and that was the way he took to do it. Elisha understood at once what was meant. It was a call to follow Elijah, a call he was hardly prepared to obey on such short notice. So he ran after the prophet as he strode on his way, and he said to him: "Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow Thee."

This request, you will observe, was much the same as that made by the would-be-follower of Jesus, and to us it seems a reasonable one, one there could be no objections to. But Elijah was not pleased with it, and told him in gruff words to go back to his ploughing. "Go back again, for what have I done to thee," thus intimating to him that a man was unfit to be called to the prophetic office, if he could not at once and forever forsake everything for its sake, even his father and mother. Elisha felt the rebuke and received it in a right spirit, and there and then slaughtered his yoke of oxen, broke up his yoke and plough for fuel, and having made a feast for his ploughmen, followed Elijah, and became an eminent prophet, a worthy successor to so great a Master.

Now, first here, the general idea of the text is to this effect, that a man, in undertaking anything worth the undertaking, must act promptly and earnestly in setting out upon it, and then having set out on his undertaking, he must go through with it, not allowing himself to be turned aside by trifles or impeded by straws, else he will not succeed.

If for instance a man wants to get along with his ploughing, it will not do for him to be forever stopping and looking back over his shoulder to see whether he is making a straight furrow, and how he is getting along. He must go on. He must stick to his work. He must not say when it is blowing somewhat fresh from the North, "It is too cold to plough to-day, I must wait till the weather moderates." If he does, he may have it still colder, and the ploughing-season will be over, and his ploughing will not be done; and without the ploughing there will be no sowing, and no sowing means no reaping, and no reaping means a stern and hungry winter, want and woe.

Earnest men of business understand the importance of such a principle as Christ lays down here for the guidance of his followers. I clipped this out of a newspaper some time ago. I do not give it in the words of the writer, but I give the gist of it. It professes to be a letter from a man who went to Cali-

fornia to make his fortune, and it is characteristic. The writer frankly tells us he went there to make money, and to be rich, if possible, in ten years. It was in the old days when labor was scarce and money plenty. On reaching California he took hold of the best he could get to do at \$20.00 a week. He hired a room for \$1.00, and fed and clothed himself respectably and comfortably for \$4.00 more, and thus saved \$15.00 a week. The next year he got \$25.00 a week, and so saved \$20.00. Three years afterwards his wages were advanced to \$35.00 a week, and then he saved \$30.00. Thus in ten years he was worth \$15,000 in gold. During those ten years he treated nobody, and he let nobody treat him. He gave no charities. He neither lent nor borrowed. He went to no amusements. He took no holidays. He neither drank, smoked, gambled, nor speculated. He bought no shares in any lottery concern. He ran no risks. He contracts no debts. He paid no doctor's bills. He kept out of society. He worked hard all day, and slept soundly all night, and enjoyed the best of health. He went there to make money, and he lived and worked with that one object in view, and he succeeded. He put his hand to the plough of money-making with the determination to get on, and he never looked back, nor turned aside, but ploughed and plodded steadily forward, and the result was he obtained his kingdom.

Now, I have not quoted this because I approve of it; I have quoted it simply to illustrate how men succeed. I grant that such a life-purpose, or even a ten-year one, is a mean life-purpose for a man who has a soul in him to live for. He is not a wise man who does it. But it shows us what steady earnest plodding after a purpose can accomplish. If a man would succeed he must have a purpose to live for, and it is better to have even a poor one than none at all. It steadies and strengthens a man to live for something. If a man can succeed in working out one such life-purpose, he can succeed in something better. A man who can, with his own hands, work out for himself a fortune in ten years, can, if better taught and better directed, work out something nobler. There is hope of a man who has a purpose to live for, but there is no hope of one who drifts with the tide, and is blown hither and thither with every changing wind.

Others again set out to succeed in other directions, in scholarship, in invention, in working out their profession, in usefulness and good-doing. They do not go to California or anywhere. They begin where they are, and they bend all their energies in the one direction. It may be a hard struggle. It may cost them years of awful effort to come to be what they want to be. But they go on, and the way opens up to them, and at last they are crowned. They come to a throne; they find a kingdom, and it is felt they have succeeded. We find in every walk of life, in the various professions, in positions and situations where you would think such a thing as success could not be found, men, who are succeeding in the best sense, honored men, good and useful men. It does not matter so much what a man goes at in the shape of a business or profession, providing that it is one where he can be a good honest man, he can succeed, if he will give himself to it, and keep at it with all the might that is in him.

But he must be prompt in setting out, and he must keep at it when he has set out. That is the way to plough, and that is the way to do anything. Our Lord attaches the greatest importance to prompt and earnest action. No tooting and trifling and jilly-dallying with Him. If a man enters upon the christian life hesitatingly; if he lives that life and does his life-work like one who is not sure whether he is right or not, he will not be likely to succeed. Prompt, decisive, earnest action is quite as important and necessary in religion as in business.

Again, another element of success is to have faith in the success of what you undertake.

You know how it is in business. Some men go into business not expecting to do much, and sure enough it is not much they do. They have no faith in the enterprise they have launched out on. They are sure it will not pay before they begin. Every step they take they take hesitatingly, falteringly. They do nothing earnestly, mightily. They are never sure. And of course they fail. How could it be otherwise? They set out to fail, for they have no faith. Without faith there can be no success.

So also is it with men in setting out to follow Christ. They are slow per-

haps in making up their minds whether they will set out at all. They want to consult their friends about it; they want to take advice as to the wisdom of the step; they want to weigh well the whole matter before they finally decide. Ah! that simply means they have no faith, and to have no faith is to have no success.

Failure is something the christian should not know anything about; it is something he should not reckon upon. It is a word that should not be in his language. Hear how Paul talks. With what a bold reckless faith. He was so sure and so strong. "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me." No ifs and buts with him as to the success of his life-work. He knew he would succeed. He began in a way which must succeed. He began with Christ, and he took Christ with him all the way through, and how else could his affairs issue but in success, and a grand success! Do not say, my hearer, "I am afraid such a poor weak christian as I am will never reach heaven. I will be sure to perish by the way."

No, weak-faithed christians, with the Son of God to be with you and help you, you cannot fail. If you had to depend upon yourself, the strength of your own right hand, the might of your own resolution, you would fail, disastrously fail. But that is not your confidence. Your confidence is in the mighty Jesus. See, then, that you begin with faith in Him, and go on with faith in Him, and wind up with faith in Him, and it will be well with you. A great success will be yours. Everything however depends upon being right just here. If Christ is not the beginning and end, the Alpha and Omega, the all in all, with us, we are undone.

See how Paul began. He began with a terrible abruptness, a right-about-face. The Lord appeared to him, flashed His glory into his eyes, struck him down in his headlong ruin, and told him in words that rung like a knell in his soul that he was as wrong as he could be. "Saul! Saul! why persecutest thou me?" What a revelation of himself to the young Jew who had been brought up with the idea that he was in the right, and every one else who did not think as he did was wrong! But when it was made clear to him that he was in the wrong, instantly he wanted to know what was right, so that he might go and do it. You do not find him asking for a day or two to consider and make up his mind. You do not find him asking time to go home to Tarsus to tell his mother and friends about it, and seek their blessing on this new departure in his life course. Nor did he ask him to return to Jerusalem and throw up his commission in due form. No; that was not Paul's way of breaking with the old and setting out on the new. His first word was, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" He wanted to know his duty, and when he knew it, he was prepared to do it.

Thus, he took hold of the gospel plough with both hands, and ploughed straight on, and never once looked back. "This one thing I do," he said, "forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." And his was a grand success.

And so with Luther, the German reformer. I have long entertained a high admiration for him as a good and great man. As soon as his eyes were opened to behold the blessed truth as it is in Jesus, he broke with Rome forever. You see him yonder nailing up his celebrated theses on the Wittenburg church gate. That was his way of taking hold of the Reformation plough, and reckless of all consequences, he drove his great iron plough right through old historical associations, and ecclesiastical rites, and national peace, and men's convictions, and his own comfort, and he never halted until Germany was ploughed from end to end, and sown broadcast with the living seed of the word. Brave old Luther; what a hero he was! And what a success crowned his faith!

And Moody of our own day is a man of kindred spirit with Paul and Luther. I have not for years seen him nor heard him, and have not taken the same interest in his work that I used to take. I see it stated that he is likely to visit Moncton and St. John before long. He is indeed a grand true man, a man of faith and spiritual power. He knows the gospel, and can preach it to the masses as few can, and he preaches nothing else. He has not any doubts as to the gospel's being the power of God unto salvation to every one that accepts it, and he gives it to the people as that which they need to lift them up and

save them. He has unbounded faith in its power to move the masses and bring the sinners of to-day to God, and he preaches it in the name of Jesus with an authority and power that neither Bishop nor Presbytery can give him, and the thousands and ten thousands who crowd to hear him believe and are saved. He takes hold of sinners with his simple mighty earnestness, and he brings them face to face with Jesus and the great eternal verities, and he cries to them that they must turn or burn, and they turn. He shoves them in between the plough-handles of God's plough, almost whether they will or not, and he tells them to lay hold with both hands, and plough or die.

And he is about right. If men are to succeed in the ploughing of the christian life, they must have faith in its success. It may be a trite saying, but there is truth in it, that nothing succeeds like success. Believe you are going to succeed, and start out in the name of God to succeed, and you will. The world's enterprises are more or less of a venture. You cannot be sure whether you are going to succeed in them. You may not make money. You may not come to power and position, to greatness and renown. You may aim high and work hard, and you may miss it after all. But he who ploughs in the Lord's field is sure of a crop. Success is no peradventure here, but a sure thing.

Again, there must be no looking back. That is the truth specially taught here. "No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the Kingdom of God."

Looking back is not uncommon in the spiritual experience. We read so often in the old Testament of backsliding Israel. And the Israel of to-day are still a backsliding people. So many start out to follow Jesus, and after a while they drop off. That was the way when He was on the earth, and it is the way still. How many we hope so much from. They start out so well, and promise so much. They seem to be in earnest, and run as if they would run all the way in the race, but they come short.

Some three hundred in connection with this congregation have at least made a start in the right direction, and having made a start we must go on. We have gone too far now to think of going back. We have crossed the Rubicon; we must conquer or die. We have laid hold of the plough, and the Lord tells us that looking back after that is to prove ourselves unfit for the Kingdom of God.

We may not have laid hold very earnestly, nor very promptly, nor very full of faith—not all of us. But we have put our hands to it, and having done so, we must plough on. There must be no looking back now, and no thought of it.

And we need have no fears of ultimate success. A man may go to California or the North West to make money, and he may work like a slave, and save like a miser, but he may not succeed in money-making. He may live poor and die poor. Only a few succeed in the race for gold. But here, in the service of Christ, we shall reap, if we faint not.

If however we are to succeed, there must be no halting and no looking back, no turning aside and no relaxing of effort. We must plough straight and steadily on. There will be hills of difficulty in our way, but we must plough over them. Many an unlocked-for stone of temptation or root of obstruction will fetch us up, and all but knock the plough-handles out of our hands, and the plough out of the furrow; but we must just take hold again with a firmer grasp, and get down deeper, and be more on our guard, and plough on, having faith in the holy enterprise we have entered on, and having faith in God and His rich promises, and a glorious success will be ours.

But let me caution you against looking back. Looking back from where we are is fatal—all but. I would be slow to say that looking back in every case is fatal. I would be slow to say that, but this I can say that it is a risk to look back. Looking back is very generally fatal to those who have had special gracious opportunities. It was fatal to Lot's wife. It was fatal to Israel in the wilderness. It was fatal to Judas. It was fatal to Ananias and Sapphira. And it has proved fatal to many others.

I have seen men look back. I have seen them come on as far as profession. I have seen them start out on the way of life full of hope and vigor. But when they seemed too far on their way to look back, when they seemed safe, I have seen them falter and fail. I have seen them relax their efforts, absent themselves from one privilege after another, the Sabbath services, the communions, all that was good, and away

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