

Why Live The Hard Way?



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WHY LIVE THE HARDWAY?

*Scripture: Acts 3:1-10; Galatians 2:20;
Matthew 5:48, 11:30*

A question put in rather slangy fashion which you frequently hear is: Why live the hard way? A great many people do just that. Maybe they manage to do their work successfully, but they do it the hard way. It shows itself in a variety of ways.

Take, for example, the prevalence of nervous tension in our time. A man told me about one of his associates who contracted the popular malady known as a nervous breakdown. He thought he was the victim of overwork. "But," said my astute friend, "this man had his nervous breakdown not because he had worked too hard, but because he had fought the job." That is to say, he built up resistances and was constantly struggling with these resistances. And it was the resistance that broke him. You never want to fight a job. Think about it but don't fight it. Just do it the best you can and do it as easy as you can. Then you will be doing it long after the man who fought the job has his name on a stone in the cemetery. Why live the hard way?

But how do you avoid living the hard way? Well, let me tell you a story - out of the Book of Acts. Peter and John were going up to the temple one day, two sturdy, healthy, peace-filled, faith-filled, dedicated men. And on the way they saw a man with crippled legs sitting by the Beautiful Gate. This man was carted there each morning

by his parents or friends and put in this same place in order that he might beg alms. He had been a cripple from birth. And he wasn't aware he could do anything except just sit there accepting alms. Along came these two healthy men, and this man held out his hand and said, "Alms alms."

Peter and John stopped and looked at him. We paraphrase the conversation. Silver and gold have we none," said these two men who lived the right way the hard way. "We haven't any money." Which isn't very encouraging to the cripple. "But," they said, "we have something else and what we have we will give you. Now this dejected man had his head down, staring at the dirt. He was a defeated character and had been looking down for years. Peter couldn't stand this. He said, "Look on us!" And the cripple, startled by this, looked up and was caught by the eye of Peter. They communicated eye to eye. And Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk."

Disbelieving, but caught by the gaze, Peter reached up and took the proffered hand. And when he had been lifted to his feet he felt he could stand. His ankle bones were strong. He took a few steps. He could walk. He was so elated that he started leaping and praising God. And he went into the temple to thank the Lord that he wasn't going to live the hard way any more.

Now let's examine the case of that crippled fellow. I don't know how old he was, but he had been there a long while. He had fastened on himself certain limitations. He was a cripple and that was all he ever could be; this was it, this was his niche in life. He didn't like it maybe, but he was used to it. If you have an image of yourself as hopelessly crippled, that is how you will be. And crippling of

the body isn't nearly as limiting as crippling of the mind and soul. But Peter broke his limitations - him a new image in the mind, so that it wasn't necessary for him any longer to live the hard way.

Let's not look too pityingly on that cripple, for most of us ourselves are victims of self-imposed limitations. We get an idea about ourselves, an image of ourselves; we think this is all we can do, all we can be; this is the little area of life in which we have to live. We tell ourselves there are certain things we cannot do. "My father couldn't do it," a person thinks; "My grandfather couldn't do it, my great-grandfather couldn't do it; I can't do it. This runs in the family." Actually, nothing runs in the family except a wrong attitude. If you have a limiting attitude you will very likely pass it on to your children even as your father who had a limiting attitude passed it on to you.

I was reading about Dr. Alfred Adler, the great psychiatrist who first described the dynamics of the inferiority complex and called it that. While still at school he got the notion that he couldn't handle mathematics. His mother had told him he couldn't. His friends told him he couldn't. His teachers told him he couldn't. He told himself he couldn't. So he had an image of himself as being dumb in mathematics. However, young Adler already had a psychiatric slant and he got the idea of the limitlessness of the human mind. And that is a great idea, the limitlessness of the human mind. So Adler got the notion that maybe he could do better with mathematics than he had thought. One day in class the teacher had a problem on the board and nobody in the class, not even any of the super smart students, could solve it. There are always two or

three super-smart ones in a class. They usually are never heard of afterwards! But Adler sat there thinking this idea of limitlessness and he said to himself, "My mind has enormous capacity." And all of a sudden he saw clearly the solution of the problem. He said aloud, "I can solve that problem." And everybody laughed. This rather shook him for a moment, but he had the idea of limitlessness and he repeated, "I can solve it." He walked to the board, took the chalk and in a few deft strokes had the problem solved. The whole class was stupefied. And from that day on Alfred Adler knew he could handle mathematics. He had dropped the limiting idea that he couldn't.

If you are failing at anything, the ~~cause~~ ~~reason~~ is because you have a picture or image of yourself failing. Do you know what you are doing? Hypnotizing yourself with a limiting idea. When you come to church and when you read the Bible and when you listen to Jesus Christ, when you lift up your eyes and ~~look at~~ ~~the~~ ~~limitations~~ limitations you have imposed upon yourself. I know this is a fact. It all depends on what you think of yourself. The image you and I have of ourselves determines the actual state of our lives. The Christian religion teaches us not only how to live good moral lives and to have faith and to be received into eternity but also how to live as children of God here and now. What Jesus Christ wants to do is to knock the shackles off our minds and remove the limitations of our lives.

Whenever I need a little picking up inspirationally I read the sports page of the newspaper. Also, I find if I read the sports page I can stand the front page. But the incident I want to tell you about was not in the newspaper, but in a book by Bob Richards, former Olympic pole

vault champion and now a preacher. It is a fascinating book called *The Heart of a Champion* which Richards describes the greatest opponent he ever had, a man named Don Bragg. He describes how he beat Bragg in meet after meet. The highest that Bragg could vault was 14 feet, 4 inches. And Richards said he couldn't understand it because he was a hulk of a man. He stood 6 feet, 3 inches high and weighed 195 pounds. As a boy he practiced swinging from branch to branch in the trees around his house and thus built a tremendous body. He ought to jump 16 feet."

But the highest Don Bragg reached was 14:4; and the reason? He didn't believe he could go beyond 14:4, and so he put his own limitation on himself. Then he got to associating with Richards and caught his deep spiritual commitment and one day said to him, "I want to be baptised and follow Jesus Christ. I want Him to make the greatest possible man of me that He can. I give myself to Jesus."

"When I baptised him," Richards said, "I trembled because I knew that as he let Jesus Christ into his life she would knock off those limitations and would outjump me like nobody's business."

And that is exactly what happened. Some days later at a meet Richards came over to borrow something from Bragg and saw that his pole vault bag now had a sign on it which read: "World's Record 15:9 or bust." It was signed "Don Bragg." The day came when Bragg went over the bar at 15:9 1/4 to set a world record. I myself saw him vault 15:8 in Madison Square Garden in New York.

"Well," you may say, "I am no athlete, no pole vaulter." Neither am I. But we do have bars to vault

have difficulties to overcome had a letter the other day from a woman who visited Marble Collegiate Church only once, six years ago. "I was in church one Sunday she wrote, "but have never been there since." In my sermon that Sunday I had developed the idea of holding in one's mind the perfect image of anything you wanted to accomplish or of any person whom you loved any responsibility you have. There is power in the perfect image.

"When you said that," the woman wrote, "I thought of my husband. I had tried to get him to come to your church with me, but he wouldn't. In truth I wouldn't have wanted him there because he was drunk when he left him. He was an alcoholic. He was always drunk. As a young man he had been a wonderful person, but he got deeper and deeper into drinking and became a defeated alcoholic.

"So," she continued, "sitting there that day I formed a perfect image of him. I saw him as God's perfect child and I determined I would hold that image." And what happened? "After six long years of many ups and downs he has approximated the image; he has realized himself. Why, the old story of the crippled man by the Beautiful Gate is modernized day after day. "Silver and gold have I none." Silver and gold is not what you need. What you need is a new concept of yourself. "Look on us." Look upon Jesus Christ and stand to your feet.

What is your image of yourself? You probably think "I am getting older. Nothing big could happen to me now. I am not what I used to be. I am on my way down. I don't know how much longer I will last. In a few years that I have remaining I will do the best I can, but it's a losing battle. I am bound to be this way. You

sure are, you sure are. You are as bad as your image of yourself. But if you will form the perfect image of your self, and hold it you will find you don't need to be that way. No, not at all.

If you've been living the hard way, get yourself identifying with Jesus Christ who lived the right way. He had ease, poise, emotional health. He had physical strength. He had mental acumen. He had everything. And if you live with Jesus Christ in your mind, in time you grow more like Him.

"I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me." Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father is in heaven is perfect." This is the great ideal. Identify your life with Jesus Christ and you won't live the hard way any more.

Recently I was talking with a friend of mine with whom I had quite a conversation ten or twelve years ago. I took a Pennsylvania Railroad train from New York to Philadelphia one day and the train was crowded. I walked through the dining car to get to the rear coach where I thought I might find a seat. In the dining car I saw a man whom I knew slightly was sitting at a table with two coffee pots in front of him and an ash tray full of cigarette stubs and the tablecloth all littered with ashes. He was drumming his fingers on the table and looked very agitated. Seeing me, he suggested, "Sit down and have a cup of coffee."

So I sat down. He was lighting one cigarette on the end of another and gulping down this coffee. I remarked, "Brother, it's a good thing it isn't whisky you are drinking or you'd be in a bad way." As it was, his fingers were yellowed from tobacco, he was as nervous as he could be, his face had an ashen look. Finally I asked him bluntly, "What is the matter with you anyway?"

"It's all very well," he answered, "for you to sit there calm-like and ask me what's the matter with me. If you had the things the matter with you that are the matter with me, you'd be drinking this much coffee too."

"What is the trouble?" I persisted.

Well, the trouble was complex. The man had a lot of complicated problems - or rather, you might say, a lot of complicated attitudes toward simple problems. But the main problem, it seemed, was that although he had for some time been vice president of his company and had thought he was in line to be president, they had by-passed him and brought in a man from the outside. This other man now sat in the president's office behind a desk and looked out a big window and took his ease in one of those swivel chairs that give you a feeling of importance as you swivel around in them, whereas he myself, but sat at a desk outside like, he said contemptuously, "an office boy." He hated the man sitting inside where he ought to be; made him mad; he felt that everybody had double-crossed him; had been undercut; he was bitter; he was disgusted.

So, being a sober man who didn't go for liquor, he was apparently trying to drown his misery in coffee and cigarettes. It really was pathetic. I said, "Well, you won't find your answer in all that smoking and coffee drinking."

"Where is my answer?" he asked.

Now I knew he was a religious man. In fact I knew he was an elder in a Presbyterian Church, although he wasn't, you might say, precisely acting the part that day on the train. He was a good man. He was just hard on that's all. He was surely living the hard way. I told him,

"What I think you ought to do is forget all this business about the new president of your company and all the problems and start thinking about Jesus. Daily work of course - but live with Jesus in your mind. Read about Him, talk to people about Him, think about Him. Learn all the passages of Scripture you care to. Keep your mind full of Him and see how many minutes of every day you can actually live with Him. As you do that, the problems of yours will fall into their proper perspective and you will gain control over them."

Well he thanked me politely, but I could see that my advice did not convince him. I got off at Philadelphia.

He was going further. Thereafter I would see him occasionally, but he never said another word about our talk on the train until several years later. Strange about these things. You throw out a seed and years later, maybe, you see the harvest. After several years he told me that when he got off at Philadelphia he got back and thought, "How theoretical can you get? That's the trouble with preachers. They're dreamers. What in the world Jesus Christ got to do with my situation?"

But I had given him the names of two or three books to read. I hadn't thought he would read them, but he kept praying about it. Among the books I had mentioned was one by the fourteenth century German theologian known as Meister Eckhart. And this classic of Christian mysticism my friend did read. When he told me that Meister Eckhart was writing about living with Jesus in one's mind he remembered that I had advocated that. He hadn't been impressed by what I said, but when he found the same idea propounded by a famous theologian he thought there must be something to it. And he started practicing it.

"Why!" he said "it changed everything for me. I began to feel at peace. Then I began to think better. And, you know, Norman, that man in the president's office is an able man. They were right in bringing him in. I wasn't ready for it and they knew it."

Well, you will be glad to know that this is one of those true stories that comes out right. The other man eventually retired and my friend now sits in the president's office; where he has done a fine job. But had he not taken that "theoretical" idea and lived with Jesus in mind he would hardly have been ready, because it was living with Jesus that straightened him out. Now he no longer lives the hard way he lives the easy way.

"My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." Look upon Him and stand on your feet and shake off your limitations and live with power. You can. Not by your own unaided strength, but through the power of Christ in you. Why live the hard way?

Prayer: Our Father, we thank Thee that there is within us much more power and strength and greatness than we have yet allowed to come into action. Forgive us for living the hard way. Grant that by identifying ourselves with Thee, we may let the life in us flow out in satisfying power and effectiveness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.