

XVI.

A Dying Man's Regrets.

8. THE USE OF TIME.

JANUARY 27, 1856.

MY strength is exhausted, my dear friends, and it was a question with me whether I should not keep silence today: I shall, however, say to you what I intended, doing it as briefly as I can.

One of the things that trouble, or that would trouble, the Christian who thinks himself near his end, if he were not at the foot of the cross, is the manner in which he has employed his time. It is consequently one of the subjects of the exhortations that he addresses to his brethren who have life before them. It is written, "Redeem the opportunity;" this version is more correct than the received one, "Redeeming the time." To redeem does not here signify to buy a second time, but to seize eagerly the opportunities that God offers us, "because the days are evil," so that an opportunity missed can never return. The good use of time, taken in a general sense, is an idea so vast that it overawes; it will be more suitable here to take it in this more limited sense, and say, Lay hold eagerly of opportunities as God causes them to arise in your path. How much time, how many opportunities are lost by idleness or unbelief—by negligence or selfishness—by self-will or hesitation—by love of sin, or by a thousand other causes. It is not necessary to pause long here, for there is no Christian whose heart and conscience do not accuse him upon this point. The time that God gives us is precious and sufficient. God, who is just, measures the time to the work, and the work to the time; and never gives us a good action to perform for which the time is lacking, nor a moment of our existence in which we have not something good to do. But how can we attain to thus filling up all our time, and doing at least some part of the immense good that a man might do, if he put in practice the precept, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with all thy might," and if he were constantly occupied in serving the Lord? I wish to submit to you a few thoughts on the subject, leaving it to your conscience to develop them.

1st, We must be deeply impressed with the conviction that we are not our own—that our time is not our own, but, like all the rest we have, belongs to God, and it is consequently in God that we ought always to seek what we have to do in order to fill up the time He gives us, and take advantage of the opportunities that He offers us. I assure you that sickness gives precious lessons upon this point. I mean upon the fact that we do not belong to ourselves, but to God. Our heart is naturally disposed (and this is the very root of sin) to constitute itself the centre and aim of life. But in sickness and suffering how can we find consolation if we seek in self the aim of life? The aim of life is then completely lost. Sickness teaches us that we must seek it elsewhere; that we do not live in order to be happy upon the earth, but we live to glorify God, which we can do in sickness as well as in health, and often still better. Let us then learn from sickness, from all the sufferings of life, and from the whole Word of God, that our time belongs to God, and that all we have to do is to employ it to His glory.

2d, Let us always be ready diligently to seize the opportunities that God offers us; they will not be wanting; and we shall find before us a life interwoven with good works prepared and ready, in which we shall only have to walk, and which will be so well and easily linked together, that our life will wholly be made up of good works and obedience, and consequently, as has just been said, of peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For this we must have our eyes constantly opened and turned towards God, saying, Lord, here I am, what wilt thou have me to do? And when we have done one thing, Lord, what wilt thou have me to do now? and so on, without a single interval not filled up with the obedience due to God; and God will in this way furnish us with the means of doing an incalculable amount of good. No one can estimate the good that might enter into the life of a single man regulated by such a disposition—witness the man Jesus Christ. Even in the things of this world, the men that have done the most are those that have lived on this principle of seizing opportunities. If you study carefully the lives of the men who have accomplished the most considerable and numerous works, such as Calvin, Luther, Bossuet, you will see that they under-took things according as they presented themselves and came in their way, and that they were men called by circumstances gradually to do what they accomplished; as Bossuet, for instance, was led by the requirements of the Dauphin's education to compose his best works; as, likewise, Calvin and Luther wrote their best works when called to do so by particular circumstances: while, on the contrary, ordinary men who do little are those who do not know how to profit by passing opportunities. They might perhaps have done as much as others who have accomplished a great deal, but they had not the art of laying hold of the opportunity; and the true art of seizing the opportunity is the Christian art of having the eyes always turned towards the Lord, and thus being ready to undertake each work as He provides it, and when one work is done, to go on to another. It is prodigious what can be accomplished in the life of a man in simply following the path that the Lord opens before each of us.

3d, We must regulate our actions with order and method, and not abandon to chance the use of the time that God gives us. I said some days ago that we should not make plans for ourselves; but there is no contradiction in saying that we ought to act with method, provided our method is undertaken in the Lord. To do what God gives us to do, there must be method and order. It is desirable to have regular hours for rising in the morning and for our work; to be as exact as possible in the hours at which we take our meals, and in all our various occupations. Life then becomes much more simple and easy; it is like a well-adjusted framework, in which the Lord has only to act. The men who have done the most are those who know best how to regulate calmly and steadily their course of life, especially if they know how to add to their firmness an activity of mind and a warmth of heart that do not always accompany a spirit of order and method, but which, when combined, enable a man to do the most astonishing things. It is said that Kant, the philosopher, sometimes amused himself in calling his servant, and taking him to witness that for forty years he had risen every morning regularly at four o'clock. Think what a man may do who rises every morning at that hour, and then think of the beneficial results of method, independently of the early hour of rising. From the fact of having a regular hour for rising, how much more time shall I not have to consecrate to the Lord, for the simple reason of my having fixed the hour in a spirit of prayer before God, taking into account the dictates of Christian pru-

dence and wisdom; while, on the contrary, if I rise at any hour, the time will be regulated only by the impulse of the moment, that is to say, by various circumstances over which I might have triumphed—by my idleness, my desire of a little more sleep, “a little folding of the hands to sleep; so shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth,” and not only poverty of money, but of mind, of labour, and of the service of God. Thus, method, and a life peacefully regulated before the Lord, is a thing of the highest importance to enable us to do much for the service of God.

And finally, not unnecessarily to multiply reflections, let us keep our bodies and minds in such a disposition as will bring no hindrance to that good use of time, and of the gifts we have received, to be employed in a way agreeable to God. Sadness, unevenness of temper, the seduction of self-will, the desire of human glory, are so many obstacles that surround and harass us unceasingly, and over which we must triumph. Then we must not neglect the body. Delicate health or weakness of body are often a great obstacle in the accomplishment of our work for God. We must accept these infirmities when God sends them, but it is our duty to take all the necessary precautions to strengthen our bodies for His service and glory: this idea elevates and sanctifies everything. Many men might have accomplished much more than they did for the glory of God, if they had not given themselves up to an activity in which there was more of piety than reflection, and which wore them out while they were young; and those who die young should examine if they have not to reproach themselves with the neglect of certain simple and easy precautions, in which it is difficult always to persevere, but that would have allowed them to labour longer for the service of God. But above all let us be careful to strengthen the mind and soul, and to avoid all that may fetter the work that God will accomplish in us and by us.

My friends, none of us know how long God may still leave us here, but we know the time He has already given us, and the reproaches that we deserve for the use we have made of it. Let us lay hold upon the portion still remaining before us, whether strong or weak, sick or in health, living or dying. We have a Saviour, every moment of whose time was engaged in obedience to God: let us follow His footsteps to glory by the cross, and at the end we shall hear that loving voice saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.”