

A Grade of Ninety

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My subject this morning is, A Grade of Ninety. No apostle gives encouragement to a personal or selfish ambition. On the contrary, all inspired teachers enjoin humility as a cardinal virtue and teach us that in honor we should prefer one another. Yet the apostle Paul in his greatest epistle says to the brethren, "Take thought for things that are honorable in the sight of all men." Now one of these is a high grade of scholarship during your college career. That is honorable in the sight of your professors, it is honorable in the sight of your fellow students, and it is honorable in the sight of all now and hereafter who may know of it. It is honorable because it gives proof of faithful, industrious labor, and proof of fair mental capacity. It is honorable when you are through with your college labors, because it also gives promise of success and usefulness in time to come. You can not very easily overestimate the value of a good grade of scholarship all through your college course, both for the value of that which secures it and for the promise it gives through all life to come.

Unfortunately, there are many students in college who have not this ambition, as I may style it. [T]hey are not moved greatly by the desire for being honored in the sight of men. They are content to be groundlings. They drag along in a go-easy way, so long as they can without suffering for it, and come out in the end just as it may happen. Now such young men will never amount to anything. They will be groundlings as long as they live. Then take thought for the things that are honorable in the sight of all men, that is that will cause them to honor you and respect you.

These groundlings have [v]arious excuses for thus being content to thus drag along. One man will say, "I have not the capacity to succeed in certain studies; they are beyond, or outside of, or apart from my mental capacity." So they try to excuse themselves for getting low grades in these studies and will dodge it entirely if they can. But let somebody else say that; let somebody else say, "That man Jones is a good sort of a fellow, but he has not the capacity to manage the classes he is in," and it will make you as mad as fury. You are not willing for any body else to make that excuse for you. That shows, that you have at least a little ambition. Men who do not desire the esteem and respect of their fellow men, have no respect for themselves; and perhaps society would be better off without them. Never admit that you have not the mental capacity for anything, until you have tried it, and tried it

faithfully. Never admit that you can not see as far into a millstone as the man who picked it.

But [w]hat is a man to do if he feels that he is really defective in some line of study? Acknowledge this and give it up? No. He must labor at it with all his might and strength and never give it up. Did you ever dream of fighting with giants or with wild beasts? I have. But I always awoke before they killed me. Did you ever dream of falling from a great height? I have. But I always awoke before I hit the ground. So, in whatever struggle you make against the giants of learning, don't let them kill you, or dash you down. Wake up before that disaster comes upon you. I often think of one dream that I had when I was a student. Algebra was the great "pons assinorum" to me, especially Quadratic Equations. I remember that one night I struggled alone in my room with a problem of which I could not get the equation. I worked at it until I was worn out and sleepy. I went to bed with my mind all distracted with it. Along toward daylight I dreamed that I was up and at work at it again. In some mysterious way my mind, although I was asleep, continued to work at it, and at last I found the equation, and I knew I had it because it met all the conditions of the problem. This excited me so that I awoke; and for fear I would forget some of the figures before morning, I got out of bed, lit my candle, the only light we had in those days, and wrote the equation out. I then went back to bed and dropped my slate off into a sound sleep. I slept until daylight and awoke refreshed. As soon as I was dressed I took my slate up and worked out the problem before breakfast. You don't know how elated I was. I felt like saying, give me another. I felt as if I could work anything, I do not mention this to boast of my work, but to show what can be done by application. My mind, when severely taxed, would not rest even in my dreams. Labor then after that fashion. Hard as algebra was for me, I never made a failure at the blackboard. One day I would have made a failure but for what appeared an accident. There were two problems in the lesson that day that I could not solve. I had worked hard all the time, that I could give to them and had failed. If the professor had called me to the board that day I could not make the statement that I now make, that I never made a failure at the board. Somehow the professor anticipated our trouble, and did not send anybody to the board, but called our attention to the fact that those two problems were not clearly stated. I believe that compilers of algebras make the statements of some problems just as obscure as they can for the purpose of testing the capacity of students and making them work hard. But, during the afternoon of that day a classmate and I went out on the slope of the mountain which rises back of the college, and worked on those problems until nearly sunset. We succeeded, and we

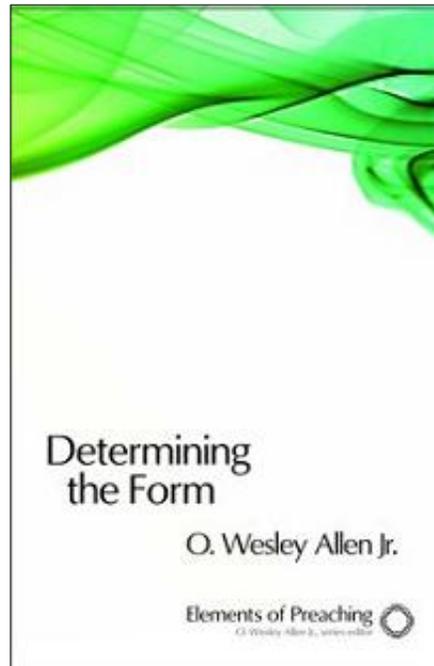
went to class the next day feeling elated. Now that is the way to work, and if you work in that way you will not be a failure.

Then again, to attain a grade of ninety or above that, requires not only hard labor and very hard labor on the part of some students, but also constant attendance upon your recitation. Do not stay away from your recitations because you have not learned all the lesson. But go without failure, keeping both eyes and both ears open. Something may drop from the lips of the professor or of some student, that will throw a flood of light on the dark places in the lesson, and give you what you lacked of being prepared. Remember this when you are in a difficulty and profit by it.

There is another consideration that I will mention which you must keep in mind while “taking thought for things honorable in the sight of all men[?]”: Avoid bad habits. By these I do not mean habits of dissipation only, but all habits that would hinder your best mental labor. Do not eat too much. Do not sit too long at your books without exercise out of doors. Out of doors exercise is necessary to a clear mind. So when, after sitting a long time, your book drops out of your hand, jump right up and run out of doors. Do not try to study when you are half asleep.

Now by pursuing this method of work you may attain a grade of ninety or more in all your classes, and you may be sure to be of some account to the world. Guizot, the great French historian and statesman, made this estimate of the students of the universities of Europe. He said, that one third of them died prematurely from bad habits contracted while they were students, one third from overwork while they were students, and that the other third governed Europe. [T]hat was in Europe. In this country it [is] a little different. The first and second classes are not so numerous, because faculties take better oversight over their students. In Germany they take none, as in nearly all other European countries. But it is true in this country as in that, that many who are energetic during their college course die early from overwork and from bad habits formed while they are in college. There are some, however, who “take thought of things honorable in the sight of all men, [?]” while they are in college, and they are the men who make our laws and write them, who hold high offices in the general government and in the state governments, and who stand at the top in the professions of law and medicine, and in the pulpit; and everywhere else where men are wanted to guide and control their fellow men. One of the greatest deficiencies in our government today is the lack of such men. When a man of high attainments is needed for any position it is like hunting for a needle in a haystack to find him. Prepare yourselves then; for “in the harvest there is work to do” and only those will be

called upon to do it, who have taken thought for things honorable in the sight of all men.



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