Have I Done Any Good?

October 2012 - Hymn of the Month

Have I Done Any Good? by Larry Beebe

The Hymn

This bright energetic hymn brings the Biblical admonition of James to life: "But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only…" "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction…"

Many have used this hymn to accompany their labors on service minded projects over the last 100 years, and it has lost none of its effectiveness for this purpose. It is as well a motivating reminder of unchanging gospel truths.

It is interesting to note that the first instance of need the author suggests we address is cheering up the sad. By this he seems to tell us that putting the gospel in action does not always require great physical or financial heroics, but small and simple everyday things. In the second verse he reminds us to avoid procrastination, and he would most likely have wholeheartedly promoted Camilla Kimball's motto: "Never suppress a generous thought." In the chorus he asserts with James than having a great reward in Heaven will require more than dreaming about it; "But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?" At the end he adopts a more positive tone and buoys us up with the promise that doing good will bring joy, and that duty done with love can be a pleasure and will bring blessings.

Entirely the inspired work of one man, lyricist and composer Will L. Thompson, *"Have I Done Any Good?"* is believed to have first been published in 1904 in the *New Century Hymnal*, and included in the 1909 *Deseret Sunday School Songs*. It appeared in later hymnals and in subsequent Latter-day Saint Hymnals, although in a slightly different form than the current 1985 edition of *Hymns*

The Text

Have I done any good in the world today?
Have I helped anyone in need?
Have I cheered up the sad
And made someone feel glad?
If not, I have failed indeed.

Has anyone's burden been lighter today
Because I was willing to share?
Have the sick and the weary been helped on their way?
When they needed my help was I there?

Chorus
Then wake up and do something more
Than dream of your mansion above.
Doing good is a pleasure,
A joy beyond measure,
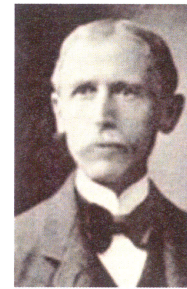A blessing of duty and love.

There are chances for work
all around just now,
Opportunities right in our way.
Do not let them pass by,
Saying, "Sometime I'll try,"
But go and do something today.

'Tis noble of man to work and to give;
Love's labor has merit alone.
Only he who does something helps others to live.
To God each good work will be known.

Chorus
Then wake up and do something more
Than dream of your mansion above.
Doing good is a pleasure,
A joy beyond measure,
A blessing of duty and love.

The Author

The Author and Composer: Will (William) Lamartine Thompson was born to Sarah and Josiah Thompson in 1847, in the vicinity of East Liverpool, Ohio. Some sources say he was born in East Liverpool, other sources say he was born in Beaver County or Smith's Ferry, Pennsylvania, and that his parents moved to East Liverpool shortly thereafter. East Liverpool sits on the Ohio River, about forty miles northwest of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, in the corner of the state where Ohio, Pennsylvania and West Virginia meet. Smith's Ferry is located in Beaver County, Pennsylvania, about five and a half miles from East Liverpool on the Ohio River. It appears all sources could be considered correct.

Will Thompson's father, Josiah, was a prominent businessman, land owner and entrepreneur in East Liverpool, which was incorporated in 1834. The town became known as the pottery capital of the world and still has an active pottery industry. Josiah Thompson had a mercantile business and is believed to have had a pottery business also. His son Will benefited from these circumstances and after completing his education in the East Liverpool schools, he traveled forty miles northwest to attend Mount Union College in Alliance, Ohio, graduating in 1870.

Mount Union College is a small private liberal arts college (now a university), founded in 1846 by dedicated Methodist laymen and was first called a seminary. It came under the full patronage of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1864.

From Mount Union College, Will headed east and from 1870 to 1873 attended the newly founded New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, Massachusetts. The New England Conservatory was founded in 1867 by Eben Tourjée, notable American music educator, choral conductor and organist. Classes were

of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The music of the original version was a little more complex with instances of more intricate rhythms in the verses, and in the chorus an alto/tenor echo of "your mansion above." The original text of the last phrase of the second verse read: "Only he who does something is worthy to live, The world has no use for the drone." Many felt this was overly harsh in view of those with severe disabilities, so for the 1985 edition the text was changed to: "Only he who does something helps others to live. To God each good work will be known."

Although other works by the writer have been more popular in the Christian world, *"Have I Done Any Good?"* is an enduring theme song for those engaged in the work of the Master.

held in the Boston Music Hall in the early years. Will later studied music in Leipzig, Germany.

It is said that Will Thompson published his first two songs at the age of sixteen, and in 1874 published four more, one of which, "Gathering Shells from the Sea," inspired by a visit to Nahant Beach and written during his time at the Conservatory, became very popular. He penned a number of secular and patriotic songs, some under various pseudonyms, and became known as "the Stephen Foster of Ohio."

It is said that he encountered difficulty in getting his music published and determined to open his own business, which he did, the W. L. Thompson Music Company. In 1874 Will's father, Josiah, built a new building to house his dry goods firm, J. Thompson and Company, and the building included "The music emporium of Professor William L. Thompson." It is said that in this first store he sold sheet music, reed organs, and musical instruments. About 1878 he remodeled his father's old store and moved there with his music business. It is reported that he also traveled the countryside by horse and buggy, singing his songs and peddling his music. He was successful enough that he built his own store which became one of the most prominent in the United States in the 1880s. He expanded to open a second store and publishing company in Chicago.

In addition to the music business Will also followed in his father's footsteps as a property owner and land developer, and about 1900 deeded a large parcel of land to the city of East Liverpool for a public park, which park still bears his name. His gift had stipulations, however, no alcohol or intoxicated persons were to be allowed in the park, and there were to be no sports or gambling on Sundays. He was active in the community as well, and is said to have founded the East Liverpool Historical Society, and served as a trustee of the Carnegie Public Library.

In his music, Will Thompson turned from the secular to the sacred and wrote many hymns. From his having attended Mount Union College, it could be speculated that he came from a devout Christian family, and his personal religious convictions are evident in his texts. He counted among his friends one of the notable evangelists of the day and it could be surmised that a common faith was part of the bond between them. He is reported to have said of his music, "…my aim has been to write good, elevating music with words and melodies

pure and clean, but not so difficult as to be beyond the ability of the masses."

One of the keys to his success as a writer is evident in his statement: "No matter where I am, at home or hotel, at the store or traveling, if an idea or theme comes to me that I deem worthy of a song, I jot it down in verse. In this way I never lose it."

Will Thompson's remarkable life came to a close in 1909 as he fell ill during a tour of Europe with his family. Cutting their trip short, they returned home, but he died a few weeks later at the age of 62.

His hometown has not forgotten him, he was inducted into the Upper Ohio Valley Hall of Fame in 2002, and thousands around the world still enjoy his music and benefit from his inspired words.

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Information in this article came from:

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