

# Starting Right

In the late eighteenth century, patriots of the War of Independence could be found both in the colonies and in the mother country, England. If it was dangerous to be a patriot in the colonies, it was even more dangerous in England.

Robert faced such a situation. Robert was a British subject who lived a short distance from London. His disdain for the policies of the British crown came to King George's attention and he issued an order for Robert's arrest. One of Robert's close friends rode from London by horseback for several hours to the village of Kent to warn Robert.

Arriving late in the evening, the friend gave Robert the news and encouraged him to leave England as quickly as possible. It was a painful conversation, but the situation left Robert little choice. He had to liquidate everything and take his young family to America. His friend thought that the arrest warrant could be delayed for about a week; Robert needed to move quickly.

A week later, Robert and his family boarded a ship for America. The farm and most of their assets were quickly sold, which meant that the assets were sold at a deep discount. Robert had about twenty thousand dollars to start over in America.

Robert's oldest son William, born in 1783, enjoyed the adventure of sailing across the Atlantic Ocean. The ship's crew was eager to share their knowledge with the fifteen-year-old teenager who proved to be an enthusiastic student.

In 1798, Robert and his wife Mary arrived in Baltimore with their young family. They had high hopes for a fresh start. A farmer by profession, Robert looked for a farm to buy. Soon he had a contract on a piece of property. New to the ways of the recently formed United States of America, Robert was unclear about the local protocol for real estate transactions. He was given guidance that proved to be erroneous. Shortly after closing on the contract, Robert's title to the property was challenged. The court ruled that Robert did not have legal right to the property. By then the seller was long gone and Robert lost his money and the farm.

With what little money he had left, Robert bought a farm in West Virginia. Robert planned to farm and also to mine the coal located on the property. He reasoned that the coal could be mined quickly to provide some immediate cash. However, he failed to consider one key factor—how to get the coal to market. The West Virginia farm was a long way from any coal markets. Hence, Robert lost the second farm.

Moving his family back to Baltimore, Robert was broke. After a short job search, he found jobs for himself and his eldest son William, working for Robert Mather, a soap and candle maker.

Early in the nineteenth century, the soap and candle business was a hot, dirty business. Neither Robert nor his son William enjoyed it. William hated the work—indoors; hot, long hours; and hard work. The work was so distasteful that young William even longed to go back to school, but the family needed him to work.

In time, Robert was offered a position managing a farm in New York State. The opportunity was too good to pass up, and Robert accepted. But to support a family of ten children was deemed too challenging, so Robert made the very difficult decision to leave young William in Baltimore to continue apprenticing under Robert Mather.

The day came for the family to depart for New York, a two-day journey by stagecoach. William went to see his family off. It was a sad scene as the stagecoach departed. William ran alongside for a long time waving and yelling good-bye to his parents and siblings. Finally, he had to stop and return to Baltimore. The teenager's heart was heavy with grief. He hated his apprenticeship in the soap and candle business, and he hated being alone.

As he journeyed back to Baltimore, he wandered through a field and found a towpath beside a canal and walked along the path. In those days, canals were a major means of transportation. The towpath was used by horses to pull the boats along the canals since steam-powered boats were not yet common.

As William walked along, he met a canal boat captain. The captain could see young William's sadness and pain and engaged him in a conversation. William was caught off-guard by the captain's presence; after all, what was he doing on the towpath? Shouldn't he be on his boat? Furthermore, why would this seasoned veteran of life engage in an unsolicited conversation with a sullen teenage boy?

Notwithstanding the questions in William's mind, he engaged in the conversation with the captain. William began by sharing his lot in life. He was scared and alone, essentially abandoned by his family, left to fend for himself. Though he had a job as an apprentice in the soap business under John Mather's tutelage, he hated the work. William stated that he wanted to be in business for himself and saw no future in apprenticing in the soap business.

The sage captain told William that a person could make any legitimate God-honoring work decent. He pointed out that someone would be the leading soap maker in the United States and it may as well be William. But for this to happen, William had to start right. He needed to apprentice under Mr. Mather with a good attitude and a teachable spirit, seeking to learn everything that he could about the business. William needed to endure the hard work with discipline, perseverance, and gratitude.

Continuing the conversation, the captain told William to not only start right but to also be a good man, which meant that William needed to turn his heart to Christ. And as a follower of Christ, there were three key principles that William needed to practice:

1. Give the Lord what belongs to Him.
2. Make honest soap.
3. Give a full pound.

"Giving the Lord what belongs to Him" was the captain's way of encouraging William to obey the teaching of Proverbs 3:9–10, which exhorts us to honor the Lord with the first-fruits of our wealth. This means that when we are financially blessed our first consideration should be to acknowledge God as the Provider and source of the blessing. Specifically, the first priority for the use of our financial blessing should be to give to the Lord in some tangible way.

"Making an honest soap" was an appeal to avoid ill-gotten gain as mentioned in Proverbs 1:19. Soap was mostly made from tallow, which was animal fat. But the most prized soap was Castile soap, which was made from vegetable oil imported from southern France. The latter was used by the gentry and also by apothecaries (pharmacists) to make medicines. One of the tricks of the trade in those days to make illicit profit was to add impurities such as starch, which made more soap, but of poorer quality. This trick was commonly used with the more expensive Castile soap. The captain's advice was that even though the users of the soap might not know about the impurities, the soap maker did and so did the Lord. In keeping with Paul's admonition about

work, making honest soap was a way to obey the Lord even when others did not know. Note Paul's teaching: "Obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord" (Colossians 3:22 NIV).

"Giving a full pound" was an admonition to use just weights and measures in accordance with Proverbs 20:10: "Differing weights and differing measures—the LORD detests them both." The captain instructed William to give customers both the quality and quantity of soap that he represented.

When the sage captain finished giving his advice, he prayed for William, which shocked William because he thought that prayer was an activity performed only at church and in the home. Furthermore, he thought prayer was primarily the purview of the clergy. As most of us are, William was a dualist. Nevertheless, the prayer brought William peace, comfort, and courage.

Bidding the captain good-bye, William returned to Baltimore with a new perspective. Mr. Mather was surprised when his young apprentice returned because William had made it clear that he loathed the business. But Mr. Mather was happy to have him back and provided him room and board. Mrs. Mather even provided William with a Bible.

Young William applied himself to his apprenticing duties and to learning the Bible. He took seriously the admonition from the captain to be a good man. Since "good" is one of God's attributes (Mark 10:18), William knew that he had to apply himself to the study of God's Word.

For two years William worked diligently under Mr. Mather and learned all that he could about the soap business. Finally, the stirring in William's heart was too great to overlook. The time had come for William to form his own soap company but Baltimore's market was too small.

The largest city in the nascent United States was New York City with a population of sixty thousand. William realized that this was the place to start his enterprise. The canal boat captain had told him that someone would be the biggest soap maker in America and it might as well be William. What better place to become the biggest soap manufacturer than in the biggest city? Plus New York City offered an added benefit; it would enable William to rejoin his family. William determined to go to New York.

When William told Mr. Mather his plan, Mr. Mather proved to be the consummate mentor. Mr. Mather caringly inquired about the specifics of William's plan. As he listened, he knew that young William would need help so he gave him the name and address of John Slidell, who at that time was the largest soap maker in America. Mr. Mather knew, though William didn't, that William's apprenticeship was not complete and there would be no better place to finish the task than under the tutelage of Mr. Slidell. William proved to be a faithful apprentice as he capitulated to the wisdom of his tutor.

Soon William was on his way to New York. The journey by stagecoach would take two days. Late on the second day, William arrived safely in New York. And though exhausted from the trip, he immediately made his way by foot to Mr. Slidell's place of business.

Mr. Slidell was a very cordial man. He greeted William warmly and listened to his request for work though Mr. Slidell had no need of anyone at the moment. But William would not be deterred. He pressed for an opportunity to work with Mr. Slidell. William offered to do anything to prove his value as a worker. Intrigued by the young man's tenacity, Mr. Slidell offered to put him to work part-time doing some menial jobs.

William took full advantage of the offer and vigorously began his work under Mr. Slidell. Soon William's work expanded to full time and, eventually, he worked every job in the company proving to be Mr. Slidell's most valuable worker.

In 1806, at the age of twenty-three, William was finally ready to establish his own a tallow factory in New York. Unbeknownst to Mr. Slidell, William leased a facility and set up a soap manufacturing plant.

The day came when William knew that he had to tell Mr. Slidell he was quitting to start his own business. Entering Mr. Slidell's office early that morning, William was at a loss for words. He appreciated Mr. Slidell and all that Mr. Slidell had taught him. It seemed wrong to quit and become a competitor of a man whom he deeply admired, yet William knew that he must. Nervously William told his boss that he was going into business for himself.

Mr. Slidell had been a wonderful boss. When William came to him, Mr. Slidell hired him even though he didn't really need the help. William was then allowed to work every job in the company, which enabled him to learn the business thoroughly. Now Mr. Slidell would prove to be the consummate business "father".

Unlike typical self-centered business owners who would have reacted negatively to William's decision, Mr. Slidell responded like a concerned father. He took the time to talk to William about his decision, not to talk him out of it, but to understand. Then Mr. Slidell asked to walk with William to his new business location a few blocks away on Dutch Street. As they walked Mr. Slidell offered William advice. Mr. Slidell genuinely encouraged William and wished him well. In effect, Mr. Slidell commissioned William in his new venture and became an ardent supporter.

That same day William sold his first soap order. Remembering his father's experience with the West Virginia coal mine, he knew that getting product to market was critical. So he made sure that his customer received the order as promised—William delivered it himself. The customer was surprised. This type of service was unusual and clearly signaled that William was going to raise the bar of service in the soap business. And so he did.

That day in 1806, the William Colgate Company was formed. Almost instantly William enjoyed success. His faithful obedience to the principles given to him by the canal boat captain served him well. The lessons from his father's failed business ventures, particularly the importance of being able to get product to market, were also vital. And the faithful tutelage of Mr. Mather and Mr. Slidell were invaluable. All of these elements laid the foundation for the success of the Colgate Company.

But the Bible was at the core of all the lessons that William learned. He knew that the Word of God was very important and that God was with him guiding and directing him even when he was in despair. Deep down William knew that his responsibility was to faithfully learn the Word of God and apply its principles. He knew that this was the way to success and prosperity in life.

Because of his encounter with the canal boat captain, William was free from dualism. He knew that all licit work was valuable to God and that God was the foundation of his business. This meant that he looked to the Bible as the handbook for his business decisions and leaned on the Holy Spirit through prayer for guidance.

William's business success was the core of his ministry through which he blessed many people. His business was a model of what could happen when people obey the Lord with their businesses. It would also be the launching pad for many other works of service.

In 1811, William married Miss Mary Gilbert; the marriage was a happy union as William and Mary were partners who shared a congenial spirit. Together they raised three sons and built a business. They were active in the Baptist church, helped start the American Bible Society, supported missionaries and seminaries, founded Colgate University, and William even served as a volunteer fireman. He was so well respected that he was recruited to run for mayor of New York City, but declined.

And as the canal boat captain had predicted, William built the largest soap company in America in the nineteenth century and it was based on biblical philosophy, values, and principles.

As the business grew, William Colgate developed a keen understanding of God's will for the company and succinctly expressed this in the William Colgate Company's statement of enduring purpose, which reads as follows: "We are not only here to sell this soap or that soap; we are here to keep people and their houses clean, healthy, comfortable, and attractive."

William led the Colgate Company for fifty years, during which time numerous products were developed to enhance the quality of life of its customers. Against all odds he built one of the great companies of our day. His success was rooted in his commitment to the principles espoused by the canal boat captain who urged him to start strong by honoring the Lord with his profits, making an honest soap, and giving a full pound.

In a day when there were few, if any, means of accountability for companies, William Colgate displayed the integrity of the construction workers who rebuilt the temple during King Josiah's reign. It was said of these men that they did not need to give an account for the money entrusted to them because they acted faithfully (2 Kings 22:7). So it was with William Colgate. He could be trusted to make honest soap and to give a full pound.

He died on his birthday, January 25, 1857, at the age of seventy-four, not knowing his company would eventually go public in 1908 and would continue for more than two hundred years reflecting the biblical philosophy, values, and principles of its founder who indeed started right and was a good man.

The godly life and ministry of a humble soap maker, William Colgate, blesses us today. May we follow his example and build our lives and our businesses based on the Word of God. And may it be said of us that we started right and were good men.

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