

Recognizing the Unrecognized

by Ray C. Stedman

We begin, with this message, a new series in the first letter of John. We have traced John's major themes thus far concerning the necessity of maintaining fellowship with the Son of God, the shared life. Then the theme of maintaining truth in the midst of an exceedingly deceitful world. And now a new series on maintaining righteousness.

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that every one who does right is born of him. {1 Jn 2:29 RSV}

It is most unfortunate that the chapter break occurs after this verse and not before. If you compare this with Verse 7 of Chapter 3, you will see that Verse 29 belongs with Chapter 3 rather than with Chapter 2. It is surprising to me that among the plethora of new versions of the Bible we have, there is none that attempts to revise the chapter divisions. The authors of these new versions seem in many instances not to hesitate in the least to take liberties with the inspired text, but these uninspired and uninspiring chapter divisions they seem to regard as so many "sacred cows" which no one has the temerity to change. Well, some day I'm going to... Well, we will leave it at that.

In this section John has been thinking of Jesus Christ. He has reminded us that there is coming an hour when each Christian will see him face to face. He is thinking of that encounter and the joy of seeing him again without that incomplete understanding we often experience now. It is not that Christians do not have personal contact with Christ now. We definitely do. It is that which keeps our faces alight, our hearts aflame, and our lives filled with joy. But, as Peter describes it, ours is now an experience of not seeing and yet loving. But John speaks of a day when we shall see him

face to face. Suddenly he sees how the knowledge of Christ which we now have, incomplete as it may be, is the key to a problem that every Christian faces at one time or another – the problem of recognizing other Christians. How to know whether a man or woman, a boy or girl, is genuinely born again. How to distinguish between the phony and the true, the mere professor and the real possessor of Christian life, between the one who is genuinely born again and the religious activist. He says the key is, "every one who does right is born of him."

Surely there is someone in this congregation who says, "Aha, that's what I've been waiting for. I have thought all along that this whole business of doctrine and belief was secondary, that the real test is a life. The man who is helpful, honest, and kind, and does the right thing, that is the man who is acceptable, that is the important thing." Well, if you are thinking that way it reveals that you are a victim of the folly of incomplete truth. Unfortunately there are many people who read the Scriptures that way. They extract from it a portion of a verse, one particular phrase, and canonize it, making that the whole Scripture and discarding the rest. For, notice, there is a qualification that John links with this. It is folly to ignore these qualifications. He says, "If you know that he is righteous, then (and only then) will you know that every one who does right is born of him." If you cannot fulfill the qualification you are in no condition to make the judgment. But if you know that he is righteous, then you have the key.

In this little verse the apostle uses two quite different words for know. There is the first one, "If you know," which means absolute truth, i.e., if you know in a clear and unqualified way, if you understand in the fullest degree "that he is righteous, then you will know," by means of

experience or observation, “that every one who does righteousness is born of him.” The key to this passage is this qualification. Do you know, as absolute truth, understanding it clearly, that God is righteous?

You say, “What does righteous mean, anyway?” Is it not strange that we can read Scripture frequently and never really grasp some of these major words? Righteous or righteousness is one of these. What is it?

Righteousness is God behaving. It is whatever God does. God, obviously, is the standard for all human behavior, or for the behavior of any creature in the universe. God is always consistent with himself, i.e., he always acts like God. He cannot act in any other way. Therefore, whatever he does is righteous. That is the standard, so that righteousness is God behaving as God. Now read that verse like that. “If you know how God behaves, then you will know that whoever behaves like God is born of him.” That is what John is saying. They will bear the family mark. Whoever behaves like God is obviously born of God, for it takes God’s life to behave like God. That is the simplicity of it.

Now we can break this down even further. In specifics, what does God do that is different? The answer is given to us in the revelation that has come through Jesus Christ. That is what he came for, to manifest the Father, to show us how God behaves, how he acts. The answer can be put briefly this way. He acts out of love in such a way as to satisfy justice. Love that satisfies justice; that is righteousness. Nothing else will qualify, it must be both; love and justice.

If you are hungry, and I feel sorry for you and steal \$5.00 from the bank to buy you a meal, I have manifested love toward you, but I have not satisfied justice with regard to the bank. That would be love without justice, and is an unrighteous act. No matter if the motive be commendable, it is love without justice.

If you parents indulge your children, giving them anything and everything they want, you show love to them, but you do not show justice. You are not treating them according to reality, and so it is an unrighteous deed. It will ultimately result in that wickedness of yours being imparted to them, and appearing as a rebellious attitude in them later on. It may be love, but it is not love that satisfies justice, and so it is not righteousness.

Now if I steal \$5.00 from the bank to satisfy my hunger and you put me in jail, without feeding me, then you have manifested justice, but no love.

The classic case of that is the scene from Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* when Shylock demands his pound of flesh as his righteous due (he thinks) before the law. But he is showing no consideration of love, therefore it is an unrighteous act, even though it is legally correct.

Thus many of the acts we do to conform with the law are still unrighteous acts in the sight of God, because there is no love in them that satisfies justice. Love that satisfies justice is always unselfish, self-giving, willing to suffer inconvenience, even heartache and shame. It is concerned about the need of another, and yet concerned that the way that need is met will not affect still others adversely. That is righteousness. It is not merely doing something helpful. There are a great many things done in the world today that are helpful, and we tend to label them as righteous, but they are not righteous. They are helpful but so much of our activity in helping one another arises directly out of our own self-interest. Many of us would positively be astounded if we could see how much of what we do is really because, down deep, somehow, our own self-interest is involved. We get something out of it. Such actions may be helpful, and surely we are grateful for all such manifestations for human life would not be possible if people did not respond in helpfulness, even for causes of self-interest, to one another. But they are not righteous deeds.

Further, righteousness is not something costly. I know there are those who give away fortunes, even give up their lives, for causes they believe in. We tend to label these as righteous deeds, but they are not necessarily so. The Apostle Paul reminds us, “If I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits me nothing,” {1 Cor 13:3 KJV}. They are not righteous, because righteousness always consists of two elements, love that satisfies justice. It is to give, whether or not you receive anything in return, and in such a way that no encouragement is given to evil. That is righteousness. That is the way God behaves. There is a burning phrase that has stuck in my mind ever since I read it in the Gospel of Luke, where our Lord describes the Father as “kind to the ungrateful and the selfish,” {Luke 6:35 RSV}. That is righteousness. Now if you know how God

behaves, what righteousness is when you see it, then you will know that every one who does that is born of him. That is the mark.

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God; {1 Jn 3:1a RSV}

Here is an astonishing thing, he says. It is not the fact that God loves, but how God loves. That is the astonishing thing. What manner of love is this! Literally, the Greek for what manner is, “of what country” is this! It is an exclamation of astonishment, of surprise. What kind of country is this, what foreign land is this, that is represented in love like that! It is so different. It is the strangeness of God’s love that is in view in this whole thing. How is God’s love strange? “Well,” John says, “in that it makes us, you and me, the children of God.”

Perhaps some of you are thinking, “Well, you may be surprised at this, but I’m not. I consider it quite logical. Why shouldn’t I be a child of God, like anyone else?”

If you think this, then you do not understand righteousness. Romans 5 reveals to us how God saw us when he found us. There are three words that describe us in that passage:

“When we were without strength,” when we were helpless, when we were unable to make any contribution to the redemption we desperately needed, when there was not a thing we could do about it, we were utterly bankrupt, and even our good was tainted with self-interest so that we could make no contribution whatsoever, “when we were without strength, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly,” – for us. But it does not stop there, it goes on even further. “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.” While we were sinners, i.e., while we were proud, overbearing in our attitude toward God, treating him with condescension and indifference, tiresome. That is what sin does, it makes us tiresome individuals, difficult to live with, hard to get along with. When we were this way, Christ died for us. Even this does not exhaust his description.

He goes on a verse or two later to say, “If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son ...” If while we were enemies; not only without strength, not only sinners, proud and prickly in our attitude, but also when we were absolutely opposed to God, enemies

of his grace, treacherous, hateful, resenting what God was doing and resisting every attempt he made to reach us: that is Paul’s description.

Now, John says, what amazing love! God flings the bloodstained mantle of his love over us and calls us his children. And he not only calls us this, but he actually makes us so:

... and so we are. {1 Jn 3:1b RSV}

Is that not amazing?

You Christian people, do you ever think of yourself that way? Do you ever think of yourself as in this condition when God found you, and you would still be like that if God had not found you? What kind of pride is it that makes us think of ourselves as some kind of special catch that God has made. How fortunate he ought to feel that we have consented to join his side!

No, no, “see what manner of love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God,” that we prickly, tiresome, difficult people should be made children of God!

Now, God does not call all men his children, as some people do. Paul makes that clear in his letter to the Galatians, “you are all the children of God, by faith in Jesus Christ,” {cf, Gal 3:26}. The only one God ever calls his child is the one who has exercised faith in Jesus Christ. God is not “the Father of all mankind.” This is an absolutely unbiblical phrase. It has no justification whatever in the Scriptures, in fact, it is positively denied. He is the Creator of all mankind. We all share with every other human being on the face of this earth a common heritage in humanity. We are all members of one race. This is an important truth; but we are not all the children of God. When you see that phrase used in that sense you know that the one who employs it does not know or understand what God has said. We are children of God only by faith in Jesus Christ.

All men can be the children of God, there is redemption provided for all. We sang it together, “Lord, I believe were sinners more, than sands upon the ocean shore; thou hast for all a ransom paid, for all a full atonement made.” There is plenty of grace in Christ. Wherever a man responds to the grace of God reaching out toward him, that man, by faith, becomes a child of God. God’s love has reached the world, has encompassed the race. In potential he is ready to fling around all

the mantle of relationship that makes men his children. That is the extent of God's love, consistent with his justice. God desires that his enemies should become his children, and that his children should become mature sons. That is his righteousness, and this is the unmistakable mark of one who becomes a child of God; he too begins to exercise righteousness. He begins to exhibit love in line with justice. He becomes concerned and prompted to act contrary to his self-interest, yet consistent with the law, in the commitment of love.

That is the mark.

Now, if you do not see that in someone else it does not necessarily mean they are not Christians. It may mean, as it does with many of us at times, that at the moment they are not acting consistent with the nature God has given them. But the point John is making is, if you do see this unmistakable mark of love acting in consistency with justice, then you need have no doubts whatsoever. The man is born of God. He may be confused in certain areas of truth, he may not agree about the mode of baptism with you, he may not have light on the dispensations, or fall short in many other things, but if you see him acting righteously, prompted by love and yet consistent with justice, then you know here is one of God's own.

But do not expect the world in general to recognize this. They will not understand and may even strongly resent the fact that another has become a child of God. Every new convert discovers this when, in the flush of his new-found enthusiasm for Christ, he goes back to his family and friends to tell them he has now become a child of God. He expects them to glow with enthusiastic rapport, but he meets with coldness and an "Oh-is-that-so? I'll-watch-and-see" attitude. He feels the first bucket of cold water thrown upon his faith. Why? John explains it. "The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him." That is why.

We Christians only manifest the nature of God occasionally. We ought to be doing it more and more as we grow in grace, so that it becomes more consistently visible, but there are occasions when we do not, and, even when we do, it is sometimes rather indistinct. But when Jesus was here among men, when he walked for thirty-three and a half years among men, living among them in the intimacy of daily life, there was never a moment but that he clearly and continuously manifested

righteousness, the nature and character of God. It was as clear as the daylight. There could never be a clearer human revelation of what God is like than there was in the Son of God. It was a perfect picture, but still they did not know him. Even then, they failed to recognize him, they did not know who he was. As the Negro spiritual sings, "Poor little Jesus boy, they didn't know who you was." They did not know, when he stood before them, that here was God behaving as God in man. They saw only the externals. They saw him as a peasant's son, a carpenter, as a tub-thumping rabble-rouser, or, at best, as a good man experiencing incredible bad luck, that is how they saw him. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, said. "Had they known him, they never would have crucified the Lord of glory," {cf, 1 Cor 2:8}. If they had any idea who it was that was standing before them – if they could have discerned the glory of his character, if they had seen behind the externals to the inward beauty he was exhibiting, they never would have nailed him to a cross. That is the last thing they would have done.

But they did not see – and why not? – because they shut their ears to what he said. They would not believe him, and, therefore, they could not see him. It is always an amazing thing to me how the "seeing is believing" proverb ever got credence among men. It is exactly the reverse, believing is seeing. Not only religiously, but in every field of life. Believing is seeing; but they did not believe, therefore, they could not see. Because they shut their ears and their eyes to his words and his deeds, they would not believe; therefore, they could not see, and they did not know him, and so they took him out and nailed him to a cross. Now if they did not know him in spite of the perfect manifestation of righteousness which he was giving, then surely we cannot expect the world to recognize us as sons of God, or to treat us with the deference that a child of God ought to expect. They will not.

Do not be surprised at this. All the writers of Scripture say, "Do not be surprised if the world discounts your Christian testimony, laughs in your face, and makes scornful, even contemptuous, remarks about what you believe. Do not be surprised at that, they did it with the Lord too." They did not know him. And it will still be true of us, as John is pointing out. The principle by which we find power, rest, joy and strength is, in the eyes of the world, utter foolishness. Paul says so. "The

word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,” {1 Cor 1:18 RSV}. The word of the cross, the principle which repudiates self-interest, the principle which renounces any advantage you may gain out of a situation in order to gain advantage for God; which risks income, position, and sometimes even life itself, in order to be true, honest, clean and committed – that principle, the world says, is foolish. “You’ll never get ahead, not in this company, if you act like that.” “Save that for church, it won’t work in business, it’s foolish.” Is that not what they say? Yet to us who are being saved, if we have the guts to act on what God has said – not only at church but in the world, at home, at school, anywhere else in life – it is the power of God. It achieves what God has come to do in human life. It is power.

What for? Why do you need power? Do you think of it in terms of miracles, dazzling displays, and wonderful deeds that you could do to capture the attention of others? Is that why you want power? Look at Colossians Chapter 1, Verse 11: Paul prays for power for believers, “May you be strengthened with all power [tremendous, isn’t it?], according to his glorious might [isn’t that exciting! For what?], for all endurance and patience with joy,” {Col 1:11 RSV}. Endurance! That means putting up with the conditions in which you live. And patience – waiting quietly for something to happen. And joy, in the midst of it all. That takes power, does it not? You cannot do that without power. It is impossible to live like that in the midst of the conditions in which you live, if you do not have the power of God. You know it, do you not? It takes far more power than any of us can possibly produce in ourselves. It takes God’s power. The word of the cross, the principle of the denial of self and self-interest, is the power of God, to us who are being saved.

Now, that is righteousness. The question John leaves with us in this whole section is this: “What is the quality of your life?” What is it like? What kind of life are you displaying before others? Do they recognize you as a child of God? The world will not, necessarily, but do other Christians? Do you have the mark?

A number of us gathered yesterday to think and pray together about the world in which we live. As we talked about conditions today, there came an increasing conviction upon us that the whole problem with this troubled, tortured, bedeviled

world, with its twisted concepts and its evident confusion, can be traced right back to the Christian church. Christians have failed to manifest the righteousness of God. They are salt without savor, in the midst of society. Therefore, it ill behooves the church to point the finger of scorn or shame or blame at the world for the condition it is in; it is our fault, we are to blame. If we were living on this level, if we were laying hold of what is so abundantly provided for us in Christ, if, in our homes, we were living like this, there would be no more bickerings and quarrelings, fightings, coldness and frigidity, between husband and wife, or parents and children. We would be a demonstration of the righteousness of God.

Now, my prayer is that not one of us, the preacher included, may go from this service content to live on the same level of life we have been living. If this world, this sick society, is ever going to be altered to any degree, it will be done God’s way. It will not be by our zealous, apparently earnest programs of trying to challenge society, to correct them, or legislate to them. It will never be done this way. It will be only as we are faithful to the calling to which God has called us, and we begin to lay hold of the provision he has given to us in Jesus Christ, that we are changed.

I do not think anything more deplorable could ever result from this service than for us to experience what we have so consistently done, from Sunday to Sunday – to come and have our hearts torn apart a bit by the Word of God, and the searching of the Spirit, and then go right back home to the same empty level of living, and never face ourselves there.

Prayer:

Our Father, we sincerely ask that you will save us from the stupid, and stupefying, technique of allowing our hearts to be searched and torn by the Spirit of God in this moment, and then to go right back and be the same kind of person we have always been. Save us from agreeing to these matters in a Sunday ministry, but through the week being no different ourselves. What a sickening, nauseating thing it must be in your sight, who has come that we might be transparent and consistent, the same at home as we are in church, the

Recognizing the Unrecognized

same at work as we are at home, the same at school as we are anywhere else, consistently the same because of the indwelling of the Son of God, the nature of God which has been given to us. Lord, we echo these words of John: "What manner of love" has been bestowed upon us, that we who know what we really are, should

be called children of God; and so we are." We cannot deny it, Father. We know it is true even though we do not act like it. But we pray that we may begin to delight thy heart as the Lord Jesus delighted thee in the days of his flesh. We thank you, in Christ's name, Amen

Copyright:© 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

What shall we Be?

by Ray C. Stedman

Beloved, we are God's children now, it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. {1 Jn 3:2-3 RSV}

The theme that holds our attention through this section of John is that of maintaining righteousness, the problem of acting out of a love which is fair to everyone concerned – that is righteousness. Human love is often very horribly unfair. It is often partial to favorites. It can be prejudiced against certain colors, other castes, or other levels of society. It can be smothering, so that the person loved feels deprived of individuality. It can be wholly unfair, and therefore is unrighteous love. But true love, God's love, as we have been learning, is righteous; it is thoughtful, it is courteous. It bears the cost of pain and heartache itself. It satisfies justice, it is careful to do the right thing. In the eyes of a stuffy, respectable, self-centered world, anyone who acts with that kind of love is always a little suspect. They appear to be slightly mad. Thus, John says, the world will not recognize us if we act this way, just as they did not recognize the Lord Jesus when he did. Because we act differently they regard us as rather foolish, ignorant, certainly slightly mad.

This has been most evident this week at Berkeley where hundreds of students have been speaking to thousands of others there about their faith in Christ, in an open, fearless witness. The reaction of many has been that these Christian students are a bit off, they are not quite all there. As someone of the Campus Crusade group put it,

“We're all nuts, but the difference is, we Christians are screwed onto the right bolt.”

That is a recognition that there is something mysterious about true Christians that makes them act differently. As Henry David Thoreau put it,

about another matter, “If I do not seem to be keeping step with those about me it is because I am listening to another drum beat.”

That is what Christians are doing, walking to another drum beat. It is that which makes us act a bit different. That mystery is evident in these opening words of Verse 2, “Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be...” The emphatic word in that sentence is the word, now. It is the first word in the Greek structure, and that is always the most emphasized word in a sentence. “Now we are the children of God.” Eternal life belongs to us now. We are not waiting until we die to get it, but we are born again right now. We have the life of Jesus Christ in us now. We are the heirs of all God's glory and promises now. This is his theme throughout the whole letter.

Now, he freely admits the world cannot see it. We do not look any different than others. I suppose it might be helpful if Christians had a red spot in the middle of their foreheads by which we could identify them, or some other kind of mark. But, the fact is, we do not look any different than others. It is still true today, as it was in the days of our Lord, that God's life is veiled in flesh and it is not always manifest within us.

Paul speaks of this in his great 8th chapter of Romans, where he says that “the whole creation is looking forward to the day when the sons of God will be manifested” {cf, Rom 8:19 KJV}, will be revealed. He uses two words that are very colorful there. He says the whole creation “waits expectantly,” and the word, waits is a word that means “to stand on tiptoe” while expectantly means “to crane the neck with eagerness.” The whole creation is standing on tiptoe, craning the neck with eager anticipation of the day that is coming when the great secret now hidden among mankind will be revealed, and the sons of God will become manifest. That is what the world unconsciously is

What Shall we Be?

looking forward to. When that day arrives, the conditions it will bring about upon the earth are so remarkable, so transcendently glorious, that in that day we will think back to all the fine-sounding words that have been uttered about “the Great Society” and will find them puerile and pitiful alongside the conditions that will prevail then. This is always the hope of the believer in Jesus Christ. He is not living in a world that is heading to a blind end; it is going to an appointed meeting, and is right on schedule, exactly along the line of the predicted program. The day is coming when the sons of God will be manifest. But the mystery now deepens because John says that not only does the world not know who we are now, but we, now, do not know what we shall be. What is it like actually to be with the Lord? What is it like to have Christ return and to be with him, experiencing the program God has in mind for his own?

This year, as you know, some of our beloved friends have left us, have gone to be with the Lord. What is it like for them? What are they experiencing? What are they like now? Those questions are shrouded in mystery to us. “It does not yet appear what we shall be.”

I do not mean they are clouded by uncertainty; the general answers are very certain. But they are not clear as to the precise nature of the conditions which shall be. We do not know, for instance, what the actual experience of life beyond this life will be. It is interesting that the Scripture only uses negative expressions along this line. There is no positive description of what life beyond this world is like, it is all negative. There will be no tears, no more sorrow, no night there, no death, no separation, no weakness, no pain – but that is all negative. What will it be like? Well, we can guess at the opposites to these negatives, but still we do not have clearly defined anywhere in Scripture what it will be like. “It does not yet appear what we shall be.”

There is that strange passage in the closing chapter of Second Corinthians where the Apostle Paul speaks of the experience of being caught up into the third heaven with the Lord. He did not know whether he was in the body or out of the body, he could not tell. He heard things and saw things which, he said, were not lawful to utter. I think the real meaning of that phrase is, they were simply indescribable in terms of our present experience. It does not yet appear what we shall be

– as far as the positive understanding of the conditions of life beyond this.

Furthermore, it does not yet appear how our present circumstances relate to what we shall be. Certainly we do not understand that. We do not understand how what we are going through right now is producing what is coming, yet that is what the Scriptures declare. In Second Corinthians the Apostle Paul cries, “For this slight momentary affliction [Is that not an amazing description, when you read the list of things he went through – stoning, prison, shipwreck, hungering and thirsting and all the other things? But he groups it all together and labels it ‘this light affliction’] is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,” {2 Cor 4:17 KJV}.

I confess I am forever fascinated by that phrase, “weight of glory.” I would like to know what that means. We speak of a weight of responsibility, by which we mean a burden to be borne, but this is a weight of glory, a responsibility so tremendous, so vast in its implications and yet so glorious in its experience, that it is like a great weight which is fully met and answered by the strength we shall have. Paul describes it as something that is being produced by what we are going through right now.

Does that not cast a lot of light on our experience today? How many of us have questions about what is happening to us, especially when pain and suffering strikes? We know there is some lesson in them, we have learned that much about God. We know that they were sent to us to teach us, but we think all the lessons are intended to be put to use down here, right now. Sometimes when we go through sorrow, difficulty, or pain and suffering we say, “Lord, teach me a lesson from this.” We learn certain lessons and think they are all learned, yet the pain goes on. That is when our faith is really put to the test. When the pain, the darkness, the strife, or the hardship still continues, and yet we have learned all the apparent lessons, that is when our hearts cry, “Why?”

Well, that is exactly why John says it does not yet appear what we shall be, and Paul adds, this light affliction is producing something. It is all working out something that will not be manifest now, in this life, but later. It is producing a weight of glory that is yet to appear.

Some years ago I heard of an artist who was painting a picture he felt would be his masterpiece.

What Shall we Be?

He was working away on it in his studio, painting the background color, when a friend came in. The artist stepped back and said, “Oh, look at it! It’s my masterpiece. What do you think of it?” The friend said, “Well, it doesn’t look like much to me, just a mass of color.” And the artist said, “Oh, I forget. You’re seeing it as it is, but I see it as it will be!” Surely God looks at us that way. He sees us as we will be, but it does not yet appear to us what we shall be.

We do not even understand how what is happening to us now affects someone else. Somebody said to me just this week, “I don’t understand the purpose of prayer. What does prayer do, how does prayer work?” I had to confess that I do not understand fully how prayer works, but I know it works. It has tremendous power to influence the lives of others.

Paul also says that the things that are happening to us affect others. He speaks of enduring travail on behalf of the Galatian Christians, going through the pains or birth again, until Christ be fully formed in them. He writes to the Corinthians, “Death is at work in us, but life in you” {2 Cor 4:12 RSV}, i.e., what is happening to me is doing something to you. He says, I delight in that. I am quite willing to bear the pain if you will get the blessing. But we do not understand that, do we? It does not yet appear what we shall be. Life is full of mystery, and even though we have the enlightenment of the Scriptures there is still much we do not understand. John frankly acknowledges this.

But notice, he quickly moves on to a note of certainty:

... but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. {1 Jn 3:2b RSV}

We do not know everything, but we do know three definite things about the future:

- Certainty #1: We know that he will appear. I wonder if there is anyone here who doubts that. This is the most certain fact of all history. You think death and taxes are sure – they are nothing compared to this. This is an absolutely inescapable fact in God’s program for mankind; he will appear. He appeared once, he will appear the second time. Of this there is no

doubt. All history is moving to this goal. You who know your Bibles well know that even the apparent confusion that exists today is but creating the conditions predicted in the Scriptures, and are working out the great purposes of God. Remember, as we saw earlier in John’s letter, all this as far as your experience is concerned is no further away than your own death, and you do not know how soon that will come. So this event, this change (we shall be like him when he appears) is no further away than your own death – and may be much closer than that.

- Certainty #2: “We know that we shall be like him. I urge you to read that very carefully now, and note the context out of which it comes. It is linked with our present limited knowledge. Note that it does not say, “when he appears we shall become like him.” There is a misconception that has arisen in many Christian minds which seemingly regards this verse as teaching that when Jesus Christ appears, when we see him at death or when he comes into time, we shall all suddenly become like him, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye. Certainly as regards the body, this is so. Our bodies become like his. Paul speaks of it to the Philippians, “this vile body of our humiliation shall be made like unto his glorious body, his body of glory. All the groanings and weakness which we experience each day will be forgotten when our body is changed into a body like his. That happens, as Paul tells us in First Corinthians 15, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, when this mortal puts on immortality, and “Death is swallowed up in victory,” {1 Cor 15:54}. But the body is but the shell of the inner life. We do not suddenly change our total character and personality when we see Jesus Christ, and there is no Scripture that says so. Rather, as John is saying here, and is brought out in other places as well, what we have been becoming, through the years of our life, will suddenly be revealed when he appears. And what we have been becoming is, little by little, stage by stage, like him. The full extent to which we have become like him will be revealed when we see him, and not before.

That is what he means.

The question, of course, that comes shouting out at us from all this is, “How much of my life is becoming like him right now?” What percent of the time am I, as a Christian, like Jesus Christ? How much of my time now, am I projecting the image of his life in me, rather than the image of the flesh in me? That is the crucial question, because that is what will be revealed when we see him. Everything else will be burned, as Paul says in First Corinthians 3, since it is but wood, hay and stubble. The gold, the silver, the precious stones, are the aspects and parts of our lives in which we have consented to be like him. But those times when we resist him, those areas in which we shut him out and assume that we have what it takes to live as God wants us to live in our own strength and energy, are all wood, hay, and stubble, and will be burned, and we will suffer loss. We have seen all this before.

But notice that the change into his likeness must happen now. We are becoming like him right now. Look at Second Corinthians 3:18:

And we all, with unveiled face [i.e., with the blindness taken from our eyes by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who teaches us all things], **beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness** [right now, as we see the Lord revealed to us from the word by the Spirit, and in the experience of fellowship with one another, we are being changed into his likeness] **from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.** {2 Cor 3:18 RSV}

Thus in the day when we see him, when he appears, then we will be like him only to the extent we have learned to be like him now. That is what makes this “light affliction” Paul speaks of so tremendously important, because it is producing this. This light affliction is working for us, Paul says, producing a likeness to him. As we see him in our circumstances, and we learn to accept them, prickly and thorny as they may be, as coming from him, sent by him to work in us that which he desires; as we learn to do this without grumbling, without

complaint, or rejection, we discover that we are becoming like him. All these things are God’s instruments to shape us and mold us to make us into his likeness. When we grumble and gripe, or complain and try to run away, we are rejecting the instruments God has sent to make us into his likeness. So we face the possibility of becoming much less like him than we could be.

- Certainty #3 is mentioned in this verse, “we shall see him as he is.” “But,” you say, “according to what this verse says, this is the reason we become like him; when we see him as he is then we all become like him.” That is exactly what has given rise to what I have previously called a misconception in the Christian life, this idea that everyone is suddenly to become fully like Jesus when we see him as he is. No, no. We are already becoming like him, even when we see him as in a mirror, faintly, darkly, as Paul puts it. It does not take a full-orbed view of Christ to make us like him, that is happening even now.

But this little word *for* in this verse, is a Greek participle that can also be translated *that*. The best commentators admit that it is ambiguous whether this should be translated, “we shall be like him *because* we shall see him as he is” or whether, as I think, it should be translated, “we shall be like him *that* we might see him as he is,” i.e., in order to see him as he is. That is why we are being changed into his likeness now, in order that when we see him we shall see him as he is.

We shall be able to understand him, to enter into communion with him, to fellowship with him.

As we well know from our own experience, you must be like something in order to understand it, to enjoy fellowship with it. That is the reason why your dog cannot enter into your sorrows or your joys. You come home brokenhearted and sit down. The dog senses something is wrong. He whines and sits looking up at you with his brown eyes expressive of concern, but he cannot understand, he is puzzled, he does not know what is wrong, he cannot enter in, he cannot comfort you. He does not and cannot understand what you are going through. Again, you are happy, and he

knows you are happy. He wags his tail, but he does not know what it is all about. He cannot know because he is a dog and you are a human; therefore, he cannot enter into what you are going through.

Christian friends, that is what the apostle says about us. No man can understand the things of God except the Spirit of God, he only can understand. No man can enter into fellowship with God by himself. We cannot possibly understand this mighty, wonderful, transcendent Being, this great fountain of love and grace and truth. We can never know him until we become like him. But that is what is happening now.

Do you understand? That is what is happening to you, through your circumstances, now.

If you see it that way, then you will see why John adds this third verse here.

And every one who thus hopes in him [i.e., Christ], purifies himself as he is pure. {1 Jn 3:3 RSV}

If the degree to which you become like him is the degree to which you will see him as he is, then what a powerful motivation this is to become like him now; to accept your circumstances, to stop quarreling with what God sends to you, and begin in everything to give thanks, allowing these strange instruments of God's grace to do their work in your life.

Paul says, "tribulation works patience, and patience, experience," {cf, Rom 5:3 ff, KJV}. Tribulation works patience – that means it makes you ready to wait and watch and pray for God to work things out. And patience works experience – experience of what? The experience of seeing God work things out so that again and again you see that the situations which caused you to fear, or made you uncertain, as you patiently waited and looked to God, doing what he indicated you could do at the moment but otherwise resting quietly, began to work out in wonderful ways, time after time. And experience works hope. Not hope in the worldly sense of uncertainty, of chance, but hope in the biblical sense, of certainty, absolute assurance.

A few experiences like this and you know absolutely that God is adequate, that he is able to work everything out. You know that every testing is another opportunity for God to demonstrate his great ability to work things out. Thus hope "makes

not ashamed," it gives confidence, a sense of unbeatable confidence which keeps you poised and assured under any circumstance. All that is what happens now, as God begins to work through our circumstances to make us like him. That is why John says that every one who has this kind of hope, this certainty; and understands this process; purifies himself, even as Christ is pure.

But you say, "Purify myself! That's the one thing I can't do." Well, that is true. God knows that. He knows you cannot purify yourself, yet he says to purify yourself here. What does he mean? Well, you purify yourself when you use the means he has provided for purification.

You mothers know how this works. Your little boy has been playing in the streets and is covered with dirt. He comes in, and you send him into the bathroom to purify himself. Like all boys, he turns on the water, runs his hands through it, turns the water off, wipes his hands on the towel and comes out. You look him over and say, "But you're not clean." "Well," he says, "I washed myself." "But look at the dirt on your hands and on your arms and on your face and behind your ears. You're not clean at all." Then every wise mother asks, "Did you use soap?" Of course, he hadn't, so she sends him back to use the soap. What is soap? It is a purifying agent, a cleansing agent. It will do the job if it is employed. So when he comes back the second time he has washed with soap and the soap has cleansed him, purified him. Now he says, "Look, mom, I've cleaned myself up." It is true, he did it, but he did it by using the provision provided.

The provision for our cleansing is the Word of God and the Spirit of God. "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin," {cf, 1 Jn 1:7}. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness," {1 Jn 1:9 KJV}. This means we must begin to take seriously this matter of a break of fellowship with Christ because of an impatient spirit, or an ugly word, or a lustful idea or thought which we have dwelt on. We must realize the stain of it does not disappear by the passage of time. It has interfered with our fellowship with the Son of God, and we must do something about it. We cannot simply forget it, we must do something about it. We must purify ourselves, using the provision he has provided, that we might be clean.

What a wonderful practical tie there is between this truth of the coming of the Lord and our

What Shall we Be?

appearing before him, and the living of our daily life! “Every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

Let me illustrate that by the life of a woman whose ministry is well known to you. Many of you know of Martha Snell Nicholson who, for more than thirty-five years was an invalid, bound to her bed, and yet whose spirit was so transcendently triumphant through those many weary years, that she wrote some of the finest Christian poetry in my opinion which has ever been written. A number of years before she died she wrote about her hope of the coming of the Lord. This is what she says:

“The best part is the blessed hope of his soon coming. How I ever lived before I grasped that wonderful truth, I do not know. How anyone lives without it these trying days I cannot imagine. Each morning I think, with a leap of the heart, ‘He may come today.’ And each evening, ‘When I awake I may be in glory.’ Each day must be lived as though it were to be my last, and there is so much to be done to purify myself and to set my house in order. I am on tiptoe with expectancy. There are no more grey days – for the radiance of His coming is on the horizon; no more dull days, with glory just around the corner; and no more lonely days, with His footstep coming ever nearer, and the thought that soon, soon, I shall see His blessed face and be forever through with pain and tears.”

That was written from a bed of pain and anguish. Yet, is it not significant that that very same person could write the following powerful expression of the desire she felt to purify herself in view of that transcendent event?

When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ
And He shows me His plan for me,
The Plan of my life as it might have been
Had He had His way, and I see

How I blocked Him here, and I checked Him
there,
And I would not yield my will –
Will there be grief in my Saviour’s eyes,
Grief, though He loves me still?

He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,
Stripped of all but His grace,
While memory runs like a hunted thing
Down the paths I cannot retrace.

Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break
With the tears that I cannot shed;
I shall cover my face with my empty hands,
I shall bow my uncrowned head...

Lord of the years that are left to me,
I give them to Thy hand;
Take me and break me, mould me to
The pattern Thou hast planned!

Prayer:

Our hearts are stirred, our Father, as we think of this mighty truth. We dwell on it all too infrequently – this end that is coming, this fact that these days here on earth shall some day come to an end. Yet that is not the end of the story. We will be with you, and all that these days have meant, and all that they could have meant, will be revealed, unfolded to us. Lord, we thank you that you have told us that what we are going through now links up with what is coming, and that we now have the right and privilege to be shaped and made and formed in Christ’s likeness now, through the circumstances in which we live.

Lord of the years that are left to us,
We give them to Thy hand;
Take us and break us, mould us to
The pattern Thou hast planned!”

In Christ’s name, Amen.

Copyright: © 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

The Greatest Revolution

by Ray C. Stedman

As we begin this fifth biennial Missionary Conference with its theme, "Across the Street and Across the Seas," ordinarily it would be expedient to interrupt our studies in the Epistle of First John and bring a special message in line with the missionary thrust. But I shall not do that largely because the passage at which we have arrived in John's letter offers an ideal text for a missionary conference. I am sure that is more than mere coincidence.

We are looking at First John 3:4-5. These two verses give us the most penetrating analysis in the whole Bible of the reason for human distress and darkness. They also declare in one mighty sentence the answer of God to this human distress. Thus, they describe the message which for 1900 years has laid hold of hearts, both young and old, and compelled them to go out across the street and across the seas in the name of Jesus Christ.

Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. {1 Jn 3:4-5 RSV}

Now I would suggest to you that Verse 4 is a more profound identification of the source of all human heartache and misery than all the psychological books that have ever been written. "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." Very recently, Billy Graham was invited to speak at the National Council of Churches Conference and said these words.

"We stand at the heart of a world revolution. Our world is on fire and man without God cannot control the flames. The fires of greed, hate, and lust are sweeping uncontrollably

around our globe. We live in the midst of crisis, danger, fear, and death."

There is not one among us who is not aware of the accuracy of these words. But what is the reason for these conditions? Why this unprecedented crisis on a worldwide basis in human history? The answer is one word: Lawlessness! There is a spirit of revolt abroad. These are revolutionary times, in the truest sense of the words. There is a widespread universal refusal to acknowledge authority in our day. There is a determination to please self at all costs, to do "what I want," regardless of what anyone else wants. Therefore, the major characteristic of our day is this word of this ancient text – lawlessness! Lawlessness, both as a principle and as an activity, i.e., a lawless attitude within every heart, resulting in lawless acts by every person. That is the Biblical picture of humanity.

Now, do you challenge that?

Let me say it again. A lawless attitude within every heart, resulting in lawless acts by every person.

Do you deny that?

Are you mentally saying to yourself, "But I'm not lawless. It's all right for you to talk about others this way, but don't talk about me. I'm a law-abiding, respectable person. I'm not lawless." I am not referring now to violations of the law of man when I use this term, just as the Scripture does not refer to violations of man-made laws such as traffic ordinances, etc. I suspect, however, that many of us would hesitate to be examined too closely even in this area. But I am speaking of law in its widest sense, law as an expression of the nature of things. That is, after all, what laws are. They are an expression of reality:

- We speak of the law of gravity. What do we mean? Why do we call it a law? Gravity is the attraction of one bit of matter toward another, and we call it a law because it is inescapably there. It is real, it has to be reckoned with. There is no avoiding it, it is realistic. That is why it is a law.
- We speak of the laws of electricity, and we mean the way electricity operates, the way it works. We say these functions are laws because they invariably work in certain ways. That is the way things are about electricity.
- We refer to laws of being, by which we mean the way human beings are made, the fact that there are certain predictable responses we inevitably make which we call laws of being, they represent the nature of things.

Now, if law in its widest sense is simply an expression of realism, the nature of reality, then lawlessness is to behave as though there were no such laws. It is to behave unrealistically. Lawlessness is to become a law unto yourself, to make up your own rules for life and to disregard those that already exist. That is basically lawlessness. It therefore is to shut your eyes to reality – to ignore the truth, to act as though fantasy were reality.

Now, would any of you like the task of counting up your lawless acts, your lawless deeds? Those times when you have said, “Well, I don’t care what happens, I’m going to do what I want anyhow.” The occasions when you have misled others to believe you think one way when actually you think another. The times when you have told yourself, “Never again!” but you have gone right back and done it again.

“Oh,” you say, “I thought lawlessness was breaking out of jail and defying the cops, or participating in a demonstration or a riot.”

Well, that is one form of lawlessness, but that is only a form of it. Lawlessness is acting unrealistically, ignoring reality, acting as though there were no laws of being. It universally expresses itself in two general ways: in open defiance, and apparent respectability.

The attitude of open defiance has produced in our day this almost universal phenomenon of the Beat Generation – young people who are reacting

against traditions, the conventions in which they were brought up, and who, in seeking to find freedom, have flung over the traces and are doing only what they want to do, in any form or shape or time they please. But lawlessness is equally expressed through apparent respectability. This needs greatly to be said, because we who reject the open arrogant defiance of the Beatnik philosophy tend to draw our self-righteous skirts about us and regard ourselves as lawful individuals simply because there are aspects of law which we recognize and to which we submit ourselves. But the deadly principle of lawlessness is as much as work in the respectable crowd as it is in the defiant group, as Paul makes very clear in his first and second chapters to the Epistle to the Romans. There he examines both sides and says they are equally guilty. That this charge is true is obvious because of the presence of certain manifestations of lawlessness which are evident in the respectable group as well as among the defiant.

What are these activities of lawlessness? Essentially they are threefold: hatred, darkness, and death.

- Hatred, the violation of love;
- Darkness, the extinguishing of light; and
- Death, the destruction of life.

Now look at this mid-twentieth century world, with its love of scientific technological advancement, its fascination with the exploration of space, and its manifestation of confusion, uncertainty, and darkness on every side. Look at this world.

Look first at the respectable world. Is there not hatred there? Is it not evident in prejudice and haughtiness, in cattiness, in exclusive clubs, in selfish cliques, in indifference to the clamant needs of other human beings? It is manifest also in quarreling parents and resentful children, in bitter feuds within the home, in scheming acts of revenge against other individuals and groups, in broken homes, in the skyrocketing divorce rates, in neglected children, in cruelty that breaks out in a most frightening manner from time to time. At the root of it all is this principle of lawlessness; this acting as though there were no restraints, no rules, no laws in life; this rejection of reality.

Take darkness, the extinguishing of light. Is that not evident everywhere in the world, even in

your own life? It is manifest in confusion, in uncertainty, in double-mindedness, in vacillation, in the freedom with which we change direction according to the expedient thing. It is evident in anxiety, in fears, tensions, in neuroses, in obsessions, and in this fantastic wave of mental illness that is sweeping the world today. The root of it again is lawlessness, the refusal to recognize reality.

Take violent death. This is so disturbing to the world in which we live, the respectable world. It is supremely evident in war. I have great sympathy with those who are disturbed about the war in Vietnam. I do not subscribe to their outlook as to the cause of the war, or how to end it, but there is not a thoughtful Christian individual who can look at war and see it as anything but the utter madness of men. You can see this tendency to manifest lawlessness in the destruction of life in crime, in the violence that fills our streets, in murders, persecutions, and suicides. It is evident in the blank hopelessness that spreads like a pall of gloom across great segments of our society, in the despair and emptiness that fills human hearts. That is death.

Now I want to ask you, is this survey realistic? Am I describing life as it is?

Oh, I know there are other things in life. I know there is joy, I know there are moments of gladness, peace, and quietness, there are the good things of life. I know I am looking at the dark side of life right now, but that dark side is there, is it not?

It is interesting to note that the world is basically divided into two great warring camps. The antagonism and enmity between these two camps breaks out at all levels of society today. There is the radical, defiant group, and the respectable, apparently law-abiding group:

The radicals are looking at the respectables and saying, "You're all a bunch of hypocrites. You don't live like you say. You smother us, you're trying to extinguish all freedom, you want to make us conform to narrow channels of your own choosing, and we refuse to do so." They point the finger at the respectables and say, "The trouble with the world is you, your narrow, bigoted attitudes, your stuffy formalism."

On the other hand, the respectables are looking at the radicals and saying, "The real trouble is, you are all lawless. You have no respect for tradition

or convention. You do not see the necessity for order and peace. You are trying to create trouble and foment revolution and riot, you are working to upset society wherever you go. The trouble with life is you!" But the Scripture, looking at the world in which we live, says both sides are equally afflicted with this virus of lawlessness – one manifesting it in one way, and one in another, but both sides equally to blame. "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness, because sin is lawlessness.

Well then, what is the answer? What is the preeminent need of our race? What is the solution to these pressures and difficulties? It is rather obvious, is it not? It is as plain as daylight. The answer, obviously, is to take away the lawless spirit. Let us eliminate this basic cause of human disaster and distress. We must change the nature of man. Man himself is his own major problem.

General Carlos Romulo, for many years the Philippine Ambassador to the United States, stated the case precisely,

"We have harnessed the atom, but we will never make war obsolete until we find a force to bridle the passions of men."

He is exactly right. The answer is so obvious. Why do we waste time with surface manifestations, outbreaks of evil that are merely symptoms of an underlying disease? Strike at the disease, do something directly about the thing that is wrong, eliminate the basic cause.

But, though the answer is obvious, yet it is hopelessly out of our reach. It is, of course, precisely what we have been trying to do:

- We have tried education, and we now have the finest schools the world has ever seen, with the most literate percentage of population ever, but the problems mount on every side. Education has failed. It does not touch the root of the problem, it merely covers all with a veneer that in many ways makes it more dangerous.
- We have tried psychological treatment. That has been the great cry of our own generation. If we would raise up a host of men and women trained to understand the human mind and heart, and let the people come and talk to them to find out what makes humanity tick, then

these things can all be straightened out. Well then, I ask you, why is it that the problems are greatly augmented now, thirty years or more after psychological treatment has been widely available, than they were before? This method is failing. The flood of lawlessness mounts on every side. Psychology does not touch the cause.

- We have tried legislation and police enforcement, and these serve to contain the problem within certain limits, at times. But again, our generation is a standing testimony to the fact that these forces are failing. They cannot cope with the problems, they are too vast, too deep-seated, too widespread. Legislation fails.
- We have tried what I call “Bo Peepism,” i.e., “leave them alone and they’ll come home, wagging their tails behind them.” It too fails, more rapidly, perhaps, than any other plan. When you leave people utterly alone, evil seems to multiply tremendously. But because we do not know what else to do, periodically we run through the whole scheme again and try all the solutions once more, in a last, desperate effort to try to make something work.

Now, I suggest to you, is this not true? Is this not a proper analysis of what has been going on? Yet the problem mounts, the sickness worsens, anarchy spreads, and we have gotten nowhere.

Well, is there any hope? Are we doomed simply to destroy ourselves as a race? The Apostle John says, “No, we are not doomed to destroy ourselves. Yes, there is hope.” He puts it all in this one sentence:

You know that he appeared to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. {1 Jn 3:5 RSV}

There is the great purpose of the coming of Jesus Christ into the world. He appeared, he was manifested, to take away sins. Linked with that is the great possibility revealed by it, “in him there is no sin.” Read it again, as John has defined sin, “He appeared to take away lawlessness, and in him there is no lawlessness.”

That is the glorious gospel of hope. There is a way, but there is only one way. That is like saying there is only one thing to breathe, air. Well, that is all you need, one thing to breathe. We only need one way out of this human dilemma, this racial problem. There is only one way because there is only One who has ever appeared in human history who can take away sins. I submit that can be established categorically, dramatically, documentarily.

He does not do it by an act of magic. He does not wave a wand or utter some religious abracadabra and the thing is done – poof, suddenly you are free from sin, lawlessness is gone, you will never have any problem with it again. If that is your idea of Christian faith then you are badly misled and mistaken. But as we have been seeing through this letter of John, the Lord Jesus Christ has appeared to take away sins. How does he do it? He does it by the impartation of life, by the turning on of light, by the awakening of love. These are the things that answer the manifestations of lawlessness. What is lawlessness? It is that which produces death, darkness, and hatred:

- Death, the destruction of life;
- Darkness, the extinguishing of light; and
- Hatred, the violation of love.

What does Jesus Christ give? He gives:

- Life in place of death,
- Light in place of darkness, and
- Love in place of hatred.

When you receive Jesus Christ, that is only the beginning. The whole Christian life follows. As we have been learning, it is a process of growth, it is a sequence of development, it is something that gradually takes over more and more, but the results are inevitably the same:

- There is the taking away of sin,
- There is the elimination of lawlessness,
- There is the restoration to the human heart of order and peace.

That is not merely an empty claim. That has been the demonstration of over 1900 years of human history. Again and again in every generation, the hardest cases have responded to this amazing remedy – homosexuals, alcoholics, drug addicts, sex addicts, acid heads, murderers, thieves, everyone. Even more difficult cases have surrendered – the proud, the intellectuals, the bitter, the cynical, the angry young men, the jaded old people. And always there have been the despairing, the wounded in spirit, the hopeless, the pathetic, the pitiful, the lost, broken derelicts that float through life. Jesus touches every race – the Chinese, Indians, Negroes, Hottentots, Russians, Eskimos. No matter where or when man has lived it is always the same story, always the same deliverance, always the same results: The healing of lawlessness. The miracle occurs when men and women, boys and girls, come to know Jesus Christ and receive him into their life. Then the sickness begins to heal.

Have you ever thought of this? It is this healing miracle that has made human life possible for 1900 years. This morning there are out on the golf courses men and women who have no interest at all in coming to church. There are others on the beaches, and others lounging quietly at home in bed reading the Sunday newspapers. These are men and women who are utterly devoid of any interest whatsoever in reading the Bible and coming to church. They are enjoying themselves. They do not realize that they are able to do so only because the gospel of Jesus Christ has penetrated this culture and society enough to permit human life to exist and make possible such moments of enjoyment. Even those who are opposed to the gospel are able to enjoy themselves only because this salt has been at work in society, arresting the awful evil of human lawlessness which otherwise would have quickly and rapidly destroyed human life. Without this restraint the times would be so terrible that not one of us would have a moment's peace to live free from persecution, violence, threat, or fear. That is the effect upon society of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Think of it. It is what makes human society possible.

Will Durant, the famous historian, who has only recently finished his monumental book, *The Story of Civilization*, has this to say about Jesus Christ:

“The revolution that Jesus sought was a far deeper one, without which reforms could only be superficial and transitory. If we could cleanse the human heart of selfish desire, cruelty, and lust, Utopia would come of itself, and all those institutions that rise out of human greed and violence and the consequent need for law, would disappear. Since this would be the profoundest of all revolutions, beside which all others would be merely coup d'états of class ousting class and exploiting in its turn, Christ was, in this spiritual sense, the greatest revolutionist in history.”

He went to the heart of the problem. He touched it at its basic issue. He deals yet with it right at the heart. “In him there is no lawlessness.” If you learn to walk and live and work in him, as Christianity makes possible, then you will know the same peace, the same ordered, restful activity that was “in him” 1900 years ago.

Now I want to ask you this: “Is there any message more important than this?”

- Can there possibly be any more challenging cause, any more effective calling than to have a part and share in this?
- What more significant thing can you ever do with your life than to have a part in this magnificent enterprise that changes the human heart at its deepest level?
- Do you not feel the call of the trumpet in that?

What a tremendous cause! What a triumphant claim! What a magnificent ministry!

Further, when you think that this has been backed by 1900 years of demonstration, during which men and women have actually, literally, been set free, delivered from this virus of lawlessness and have been restored to peace, blessing, order, freedom and liberty, then I ask you,

- What could be greater than this?
- What message is more needed in this world of ours than this?

The Greatest Revolution

- Shall we, the Christian church, turn away from the declaration of this message to some lesser thing?
- Shall we give ourselves to the mere salving of symptoms, or shall we give ourselves more fully to this message that sets men free?

– Across the Street and Across the Seas.

No wonder the Lord Jesus said, “This gospel must be preached unto all generations, and to all nations; then shall the end come,” {cf, Matt 28:18-20, Mark 16:15, Luke 24:27}.

Prayer:

Our Father, our own hearts echo the challenge of this message with the recognition that we, too, have experienced this. Most of us are Exhibit A in this respect. We are being set free from the passion, the power, the dominance of lawlessness in our life; from self-pleasing, living for ourselves, and thus ignoring the

nature of the world that you have made. Lord, we thank you for this. We know that there is still a great deal of it in us, but oh, thank God, the remedy is at work. The life of the Lord Jesus is more and more possessing us. We are being changed by the Spirit of God into his likeness and thus into his lawfulness. Lord, we pray that we may have the high and holy privilege of being a part of this, the greatest cause of all, the greatest revolution of all, that we may see clearly that there is nothing greater that we could possibly give ourselves to than the thrusting forward of this mighty message, the making it possible for those who are still bound and sitting in darkness, despairing and hopeless, to hear, to see, to know and to be delivered. We pray that this week may be the time when we cease to reserve areas of our life to ourselves, but will give them over, completely and wholly, to this major cause that occupies and fills thy heart. We pray in Christ’s name, Amen.

Copyright: © 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.

The Mystery of Righteousness

by Ray C. Stedman

It is my great hope that there is coming to all, as we study together in First John, a growing awareness that every Christian must be a revolutionary because Christ is a revolutionary. God does not like the status quo. He is grieved and hurt by racial hatred, by war, by poverty, by unhappy homes, by human strife. God is a revolutionist: he is determined to protest these conditions, whenever and wherever they occur. But more than that, he is determined to correct them, to deliver men from them. Speaking generally, it would not be wrong to say that God is in full sympathy with most of the goals of the radical groups that exist today. He sees clearly the same things against which they are protesting. But there are two things that mark the difference between God's revolutionary methods and those of the radicals:

First, God thoroughly understands and identifies the underlying cause of these problems. He names it for us. We saw it last time in Verse 4 of Chapter 3 of First John: Lawlessness! That is the problem: a revolt against reality. It is not economic distress, it is not class warfare, it is not pressure politics behind the problem of human strife and unrest. All of these are symptoms of an underlying cause. The underlying cause is, simply, man rebelling against the laws of his own being. That is the problem. It is civil war in the heart of every man, both that of the radical as well as the respectable. In other words, men have already caught the disease they are trying so desperately to cure.

The second thing that marks the difference in God's approach to these problems is that he has, himself, already done the only thing that can be done to correct this. In the mystery of the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, he has provided a means by which to break the grip of this

lawless principle upon human beings, and to permit us to become gripped, instead, by the more powerful principle of love – and all this done in the person of Jesus Christ, his Son. This is what John declares to us in the verse we looked at in our last study,

You know that he appeared to take away sins [or lawlessness], and in him there is no lawlessness. {1 Jn 3:5 RSV}

Well, what is in him, if there is no lawlessness? Obviously, the trouble with us is lawlessness. We do not like something, and so we do not do it. Even though it is the right thing to do, even though we know it is for our best interests, if we do not like it, we do not do it. So we are lawless, whether we are respectable in other areas, or radical. This is the problem. But “in him there is no lawlessness.” Well, what is in him? Love. In him there is love. We have learned in Romans that love is the fulfilling of the Law, that when someone acts in genuine love he fulfills all the Law there is to be fulfilled. This explains the link between love and righteousness. Here is another one of the great terms of the gospel, righteousness. Anyone who fulfills the Law is righteous, and since love is the fulfilling of the Law, therefore, righteousness is love behaving. That is all it is.

We have already learned many times in our studies together that love is the very being of God, the essence of his nature, and thus of the nature of Christ. John says, God is love. Yet that life which is love, is also light. It illuminates, it clarifies, it dispels darkness, it breaks through our confusion and our lack of understanding and makes us see things as they are. We read of the Lord Jesus, “in him was life, and the life was the light of men,” {John 1:4 RSV}. So, with this threefold gift of

love, of light, and of life, when Christ enters a human heart he destroys lawlessness. Lawlessness is the destruction of life, the extinguishing of light, and the violation of love. Now what could be simpler, as a solution to the problems of life than that? That strikes at the very heart of discord.

That is why, as we saw last, the gospel is the greatest revolution of all times, the revolution that occurs at the deepest level of the human heart and life.

Now the great question is, “How do we lay hold of this threefold gift in actual daily practice?” How does the gift of love from Christ destroy and push out the lawlessness of our lives? In what way does it happen? We have seen it all before, but John now beautifully summarizes it for us in Verses 6 and 7 of Chapter 3:

No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as he [Christ] is righteous. {1 Jn 3:6-7 RSV}

Here is the mystery of righteousness. John does not call it that, but Paul refers to it as “the mystery of God-likeness, or godliness” {1 Tim 3:16 KJV}, i.e., the way by which a man or a woman, or a boy or a girl, begins to live like God, to become God-like though remaining a man. To become God-like in his attitudes, his outlook, his actions and his reactions.

If you read the Old Testament, you know that certain men of olden times discovered this secret. They became, to a great extent, God-like, they lived like God. Abraham, for instance, Joseph, Moses, King David, and others. They became stabilized, outgoing, love-oriented, they became men in every true sense of the word.

The secret was hidden to most. Actually, of course, it has always been the same secret, it was Christ in them. That is forever the secret of God-likeness. But no one understood that in the Old Testament days, they could not because it had not yet become historically evident. But now, Paul says (and John and Peter and others), the mystery has been made clear. Paul calls this, in Colossians, “the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints,” {cf, Col 1:26 RSV}. Let me share with you the full passage in

which that occurs, as it is found in Phillips’ translation.

I am a minister of the church, by divine commission, a commission granted to me for your benefit, and for a special purpose: that I might fully declare God’s Word – that sacred mystery which up till now has been hidden in every age and every generation, but which is now as clear as daylight to those who love God. They are those to whom God has planned to give a vision of the full wonder and splendor of his secret plan for the nations. {Col 1:25-27a J. B. Phillips}

Did you hear that? God has a secret plan for the nations. That is at once the explanation of, and the remedy for, all the evil that exists in the human race. Now he goes on,

And the secret is simply this: Christ in you! Yes, Christ in you, bringing with him the hope of all the glorious things to come. {Col 1:27b J. B. Phillips}

Now those are not just so many beautiful words. That is a very practical proposition which God is working out through human history, and is making available to men.

Peter says the same thing in other words, in his second letter (the Living Letters translation):

For as you know Him better [i.e., Christ], He will give you through His great power, everything you need for living a truly good life: He even shares His own glory and His own goodness with us! And by that same mighty power He has given us all the other rich and wonderful blessings He promised; for instance, the promise to save us from the lust and rottenness all around us, and to give us His own character. {2 Pet 1:3-4 Living Letters}

That is the Good News. John puts it bluntly and plainly, “No one who abides in him sins.” Or, to use the interchangeable term for sin which he has just given us, “No one who abides in him lives lawlessly.”

Perhaps some will say, “Now, wait a minute! Isn’t this a contradiction? In the first chapter, Verse 8, John says, ‘If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.’ And

now, in Chapter 3, he says, 'No one who abides in him [Christ] sins.' How is this? And isn't it even more positively put in Verse 9 of Chapter 3, 'No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.'" Surely this is a bit of a problem.

In Verse 6 he says a Christian does not sin; in Verse 9 he says he cannot sin, because he is born of God. Yet, again in Chapter 1, he says, "if we say we do not sin, we are liars"; and in Chapter 2, Verse 1, "if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

Admittedly, we have come to one of the most difficult passages of Scripture. But yet it is a very important one, and is not a contradiction. The man who writes this is no fool, he is an intelligent person. He does not say on one page something that contradicts himself on another page. He is an inspired apostle, and writes with wisdom, intelligence, and understanding. The problem does not lie in the text; the problem, if anywhere, lies with us. We must think this through, we must give our attention to this.

I propose, therefore, that we take some time with this passage because of its importance, that we might understand the working of the mystery of evil in human life, and, likewise, the mystery of righteousness which counteracts it.

We shall examine this problem in much greater detail in future messages, but, for the present, I will point out that the problem is really settled by the tense of the verb the apostle employs here, "No one who abides in him sins." He uses the present continuous tense for the word *sins* to mean "no one who abides in him keeps on sinning" or lives in lawlessness. If John had wanted to refer to a single act of sin there is a Greek tense that would have made it very clear. He could have employed the aorist tense which would then have said, without any question, "No one who abides in him can commit even one single act of sin." But he did not say that. He used instead this continuous tense, and to note this will help us a great deal in understanding the passage. So he is saying, "Any one who abides in Christ does not go on living in sin." He cannot live lawlessly, he does not keep on sinning.

But now do not miss the trees because we are so intent upon the wood. How do you avoid living lawlessly? How does one come to this place of not living sinfully? Well, as he puts it, it is all in this

one word, *abides*. "No one who abides in him sins."

Remember that in Chapter 2 he had said, "And now, little children, abide in him, so that when he appears he may have confidence and not shrink from him in shame at his coming," {1 Jn 2:28 RSV}. The key is abiding. We have already seen that the relationship of a believer to Jesus Christ, involves him in two aspects. Abiding in Christ is an advance on simply being "in Christ." Our Lord himself spoke of these two aspects of a disciple's relationship to him. He described them by these words, "you in me, and I in you," {John 14:20b RSV}. Now those two aspects are very important:

1. "You in me" is to be in Christ. It is to believe, to receive Jesus Christ. It is to be joined in a union with him that results in new birth, the impartation of his life and love to us, by an act of faith. It is to receive him, to act upon his invitation to come into your life. When you do, you are "in Christ." You are in union with him. "You in me," that is the first union. But that is not the aspect John is describing here. That union does not necessarily result in being freed from the bondage of sin. Oh, it makes freedom possible, it is all potentially there, but in itself it does not result in deliverance. That is why, as we have seen, it is quite possible to be "in Christ" and go on living for a time in sin, lawlessly.
2. But it is the second relationship, "I in you," Christ in us, experienced by an attitude of faith, in which he makes his home in our hearts, that frees us from sin's reign. We allow him to live through us, we expect him to do so, in every moment of our experience. It is this that is called *abiding*, and it is this that results in freeing us from the bondage and the power of sin, so that we can live godly, God-like lives.

As you read through the Scriptures you discover certain things that are produced by this abiding relationship. In the great 15th chapter of John's gospel, Jesus said these words: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit," {John 15:5b RSV}. So abounding fruit comes from this relationship of abiding. Abiding is abounding. The fruit, of course, is the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness,

goodness, faith, meekness and self-control. These are the marks of One who abides.

Later on in that same chapter, Verse 7, he says, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you," {John 15:7 RSV}. Here effectual prayer is a result, not of being "in Christ," but of "abiding in Christ."

Are your prayers being answered? Are you seeing God at work in your experience? Are the things you ask for that are clearly in line with his great program or men coming to pass in the lives of individuals for whom you pray? This is the promise, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will [within that relationship], and it shall be done for you."

Now John says, "No one who abides in him sins," i.e., lives lawlessly. He is able to live Godlike. Therefore, this relationship of abiding is very important.

"Well," you say, "just what is it? This is what bothers me. I've heard all these great promises before – and God knows I want them – but it eludes me. What is this abiding, anyway?"

Well, let us ask the Lord again for clarification on this. Once again in the 15th chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus says these words, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love," {John 15:10a RSV}. That is putting it plainly, is it not? If you obey me, you will abide in me. "And he that abides in me ... bears much fruit," {John 15:5}. "He that abides in me can ask whatever he will and it will be done," {cf, John 15:7}. "He that abides in me will not sin," {cf, 1 Jn 3:6a}. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love," {John 15:10}. Of course, that obedience is by faith; i.e., this is not an exhortation to give ourselves to a groveling, dogged obedience, saying, "Here's a rule and I've got to do it." No, no. It is an expectant obedience, an obedience that acts expecting him to come through to make it a joy. That is the whole secret. It is by faith.

Well, how does this work in practice?

Since Christ is in you, if you are a believer, you are in him and he is in you, then you need but set yourself to do what he says, expecting him to act, and the minute you start doing it, the power to carry it through will be there, to make you able to do it and to make it a joy.

It is like those Israelites in the Old Testament who were told to cross first the Red Sea and later

the river Jordan. Here was a body of water before them, but the command of God has to go through the water. It looked like suicide, utter foolishness. The worst thing they could do would be to plunge headlong into the depths of the waters. But, on each occasion, as the children of Israel stepped down and their feet touched the water, the waters parted and they went on through. It was when they acted on what they were told to do, despite any appearance that anything was happening, that it happened. Of course, this was not simply a thoughtless, spectacular miracle. It was a parable, designed to teach us how God acts.

When we hear his command to us, whether we feel like it will work or not, the whole idea is to obey. Act on it! Do what he says! When we do, we discover that the minute we begin to act, the power of God acts also. What we are hoping to accomplish will be accomplished. It works out as God said. We discover that God is at work within us. That is what Jesus means, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love," {John 15:10a RSV}.

This is also what Paul is saying to the Philippians. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to do of his good pleasure – the thing that pleases him," {Phil 2:12}.

Do you find it difficult to love some, for instance? This is one of the most nagging, persistent problems of life. Someone treats us cruelly, or indifferently, and our natural reaction, stemming from our tie with Adam, is immediately to strike back, to avenge ourselves, to cut them off, don't speak to them, or to say something caustic. We wish to avenge ourselves. But that is not the command of the Lord. His word is crystal clear. "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord," {Rom 12:19}. Do not avenge yourself. He says, "Love your enemies... Do good to those who hate you and despitefully use you. Pray for your enemies," {Matt 5:44}. "Love one another," {John 13:34, 15:12, 15:17, et al}. But you do not feel like doing that; in fact, that is the last thing you feel like doing. You are like those priests who did not feel like putting their feet in that cold, dirty water of the Jordan River, either. But God had said to do it. And when the soles of their feet touched the water, they parted, and the people went on through.

So, when you set yourself to act toward this individual whom you are finding it difficult to love

as love would act; if you do something that love would do to that individual; if you respond to him as those who love him would respond; if you obey God, in other words, you will find that if you are expecting him to act, he will. The feeling of love will follow your act instead of preceding it, and you will discover that your whole relationship, your whole attitude, to the individual is different. You will see him no longer as an obstacle standing across your pathway, opposing what you want to do, but you will see him as a person with a problem – a problem like the problems you have had – who needs understanding and acceptance. Then the problem will clear up, as your problems have cleared up.

Are you tempted to lust? Are you tempted, in this sex-saturated society, to give way to lusts and desires of the flesh that you know are wrong? Well, there is plenty of it around today and in respectable circles, too. But the word of God is, “Flee youthful lusts, because they war against the soul,” {cf, 2 Tim 2:22 KJV}. It is not that sex is wrong. Sex is wonderful. Sex is what God made it to be; it is his gift to humanity. But the improper use of it is wrong. So God says, flee youthful lusts because they will destroy you, they war against you. Well then, obey them! Turn from them and turn to him in expectant faith and you will find there is an immediate sense of release, a flood of cleansing, purifying, love from him that makes your renunciation not an act of dogged, dismal determination, but an act of delight, of gladness and freedom. What a difference!

Even an unregenerate man, a non-Christian, if he wants to for one reason or another, can set his will against doing something that is harmful or wrong or evil, and can stop it. Certainly he can. But he will not have any particular joy in doing so. He will be acting from a grim, dismal determination to walk in this way, with no compensating light or gladness. But the difference for a Christian is that when he so acts, Christ is there. We obey him, and thus we abide in his love. Every act of renunciation against these forces that would destroy us results in an accompanying sense of glorification, of joy, causing us to rejoice in God’s grace.

If you have him, you can do these things. If you cannot do them, it is because you do not have him. That is why John goes on to add here, “no one who sins has either seen him or known him.”

That is, so strong is our link with him, and so powerful are the cleansing tides of his life in us, that if we say we have Christ in us and do not show some evidence of it, in increasing degree, then we have been deceiving ourselves. We do not have him at all. We have never seen him or known him. If you can live content with evil, without a struggle, deliberately doing what the Word of God declares is not right; if you can go on thus, and it does not particularly bother you, you have no struggle with it, then you have no right to name yourself a Christian. That is what John is saying. You have not seen him, you have not known him. Jesus Christ came into the world, and into your life, to destroy lawlessness. That is his goal. That is the revolution he is set on bringing to pass. If this is not happening, then you do not have him, for he will not change his purpose. He is moving to this end. This is what he came for, and this is what he will do.

You are only kidding yourself if you think you have him because you know many Bible verses or you can recite certain creeds, you have been attending church all your life, or your whole family is Christian. You are deceiving yourself. No, one who lives lawlessly has either seen him or known him.

So he concludes in Verse 7,

**Little children, let no one deceive you.
{1 Jn 3:7a RSV}**

Oh, they will try. There is much attempt today to put on a pious front and make it look real, but do not let them kid you. The true sign is this: “He who does right is righteous.” Remember, righteousness is love behaving rightly. He who acts that way (and that kind of love always involves self-sacrifice), it is because he is linked to the Righteous One. There is no other way to act righteously than that:

**He who does right is righteous, as he is
righteous. {1 Jn 3:7b RSV}**

It is interesting that in the original language here the pronoun *he* is literally, “that one.” It appears also in Verse 5. “You know that ‘that one’ appeared to take away sins.” And Verse 7, “Little children, let no one deceive you. He who does right is righteous, as ‘that one’ is righteous.” It is almost as though John is seeing Christ standing there. So

close is he to him, it is as though he were standing right there, and John refers to him as “that one.” He who does right is righteous because *that one* is righteous, and he is living in him. Because he is living in him, there must be righteousness breaking out from time to time in that individual’s life. It has got to be there. When a person discovers this and learns to abide in him, all the time expecting that one to be working in him, then he soon learns he cannot do anything without him. But he discovers that with him, he can do anything he asks.

That is why Paul says, “I can do all things, through Christ who strengthens me,” {cf, Phil 4:13}.

Prayer:

What a wonderful revolutionary thing this is, our Father. What a glorious transformation of human life is involved in this. How it searches us out and probes us, plumbing the depths of our conscious as well as our unconscious life, doing radical things to us, changing us from the inside out, from the bottom up. We thank you, Lord, that this is the continuing experience of those who come in contact with this glorious, wonderful Person, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and walks among men, who offers himself to us for this very purpose. Make us all here living examples of this revolutionary movement, challenging the status quo, refusing to accept things as they are, because we have caught a vision of things as they might be. We ask this in Christ’s name, Amen.

The Mystery of Evil

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to a passage of very great difficulty to many, but one of extreme value to us, especially in this day in which we live. The business of preaching is largely to reveal how the conditions which we face daily are being created by profound and fundamental causes that can only be seen through the window of the Word of God. We cannot understand life as it is being lived today with the problems you and I are facing unless we view it through the insight and revelation of the Scripture. The business of preaching is to make this revelation so clear that all can see how to apply them to life, and then to declare the great remedy, the only one which can ever permanently change the conditions in which we live.

This week the papers have been full of an appalling condition in one of our local high schools, where scores of high school young people have become involved in the practice of using such drugs as marijuana and LSD. Many in our community have been shocked by the revelation of what is going on. Yet those who work with high school young people know that this is nothing new. It is present in every high school in this area and is spreading widely, not only in California but across the nation. It is part of the greater picture of an increasing moral collapse in our day.

The most appalling thing to the authorities who are attempting to deal with this problem is that nothing they do seems to be able to stem the tide of this spreading evil. They once thought these things were only a manifestation of youthful folly – just the normal exuberance of youth, the desire to step over the traces and try out new experiences. Therefore, the authorities felt that all that was needed was simply to explain the dangers to our young people, help them to see that there were problems involved, and as soon as they were educated enough about the evils and dangers of these things, this would all stop. Thus, a few years

ago, teams of men were organized to go around to high schools and explain to our young people the possible deteriorating effect of these drugs upon their health and upon their moral lives. But I was interested to note this last month or so that many of these teams were disbanded because they found the young people were greeting their educational efforts with contempt and disdain, and were laughing at them. Instead of decreasing the traffic in drugs, these efforts were actually increasing it by making youngsters more desirous of experimenting along these lines.

The authorities began to see that there was something deeper, something more troublesome behind this, and that it could not be explained on such simple terms as mere youthful exuberance. Then they felt that what was required was more stringent legislation, more severe penalties for this kind of problem. This is what is being tried now, but, as in previous cases of this kind, it will not serve to solve the problem. The traffic is still increasing and the authorities are becoming greatly alarmed. They do not know what to do to stop this. They are appalled at the rapidly accelerating speed of moral revolt, and the apparent imperviousness of youth to all attempts to slow it and to reveal it for what it is, and thus to stop this moral decay.

Well, what is behind all this? It is becoming apparent, even to those attempting to deal with this problem from an authoritative line, that we are facing a flood of immorality which is being fed by an unseen fountain that is gushing out moral filth faster than it can ever be cleaned up. It is most frustrating to those attempting to deal with these problems to discover that the power behind all this is apparently an unseen power, disembodied, invisible. You cannot legislate against it, for it is above and beyond law, beyond human control. You cannot get hold of it by any of the ordinary avenues that are open to human power. This

modern enigma brings us exactly to what John is declaring in Chapter 3, Verse 8. He says to us very plainly:

He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. {1 Jn 3:8 RSV}

The apostle declares that the problem behind all that we are facing today is the existence of a malevolent, evil being who continually is subverting every human effort to counteract his activities, and is pouring out a flood of evil continuously into the human stream of life. This is why we can never permanently solve the problem. We are forever running into manifestations of the working of this superhuman force in life.

Notice that this verse is part of a larger passage in which the apostle is dealing with the whole problem of evil. It might be helpful to point out that these are really two parallel passages, running side by side in Verses 4-7 and 8-10. Their parallelism is evident in three ways:

- First, each has a word to say about sin. In Verse 4, the apostle says, "Every one who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness." Then in Verse 8, the first verse of the second parallel passage, he says, "He who commits sin is of the devil..." One describes the nature of sin, lawlessness; the other declares the origin of sin, the devil.
- Then, in each passage, there is a word about Christ and his appearing. In Verse 5, "You know that he appeared to take away lawlessness, and in him there is no lawlessness." In Verse 8, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."
- Finally, there is a logical conclusion resulting from these statements. In Verse 6, "No one who abides in him sins;" i.e., as a result of the fact that Christ has come to take away sins. And in Verse 9, "No one born of God commits sin;" as a result of the fact that God's nature abides in him, and the Son of God has come to destroy the works of the devil.

Now these two passages are dealing with the mystery of evil which has been confronting the human race from the very beginning and is so evident in our society today. I wonder if there has even been a time when we were more obviously faced by superhuman forces which we simply cannot explain or deal with by the normal methods of human control. The difficulties are beyond this. As we saw from the Apostle Paul, there is no adequate explanation for the hideous tangle of human problems, such as exists today, if we fail to see the malevolent genius of the devil behind these things. As Paul put it, "We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against wicked spirits in high places," {Eph 6:12 KJV}. All the apostles agree that we can never adequately explain what life is about, and especially explain the problem of human evil, if we do not come to grips with these unseen forces and recognize their existence.

Now, in this passage in John there are two phrases that we must particularly note. One is, "the devil has sinned from the beginning," or, literally, "the devil is sinning from the beginning." The second phrase occurs in the latter part of the verse, "the works of the devil." The devil's sin, and the devil's works. These are not the same thing and it is very important that we distinguish between the sin of the devil and the works of the devil. They are quite different.

The sin of the devil is, as John says, "from the beginning." It dates from the time when he first became the devil. God never created a devil. He never created a fallen man, although man is now fallen. He never created a fallen angel, although there are fallen angels. And, chiefly, he never created the fallen angel, the devil. He created a being of beauty, glory, intelligence and responsibility, but as in the case of man, he gave him a free will. It was the activity of that free will, opposed to his Creator, that changed the angel God created into the devil. The Lord Jesus is himself the authority who tells us that the devil "abode not in the truth" {John 8:44 KJV}, i.e., literally, he did not continue to stand in the truth. There was a time when the devil was "in the truth," but he was not the devil then. Most scholars feel that we have a description of the fall of this angel in Isaiah 14, where a being whom Isaiah called the Day Star, or,

literally, from the Hebrew, *Lucifer*, is described. Isaiah 14, Verse 12:

**“How you are fallen from heaven,
O Day Star, son of Dawn!
How you are cut down to the ground,
you who laid the nations low!
You said in your heart,
‘I will ascend to heaven;
above the stars of God
I will set my throne on high;
I will sit on the mount of assembly
in the far north;
I will ascend above the heights of the
clouds,
I will make myself like the Most High.”**
{Isa 14:12-14 RSV}

Five times the devil said, “I will,” “I will,” “I will,” “I will,” “I will.” Here was a glorious being who was not content with the glory he had. In his own view he was not glorious enough and he determined to be more glorious. Free will became, in the devil, “I will,” and that “I will,” five times repeated, regarded God as an obstacle to the devil’s plans and no longer a necessity in the devil’s life. He set himself to become higher than God, to become “like the Most High.” Thus, he set himself above all the law and will of God, and became a law unto himself. That is what lawlessness is, acting as though you are a law unto yourself without regard for any other law, any other person, or any other authority. But whenever we adopt the attitude, “I will do what I want, I am a law unto myself,” we have repeated the sin of the devil. That is lawlessness; that is the devil’s sin.

That is why John says every one who commits sin is “of the devil,” because what he is doing is repeating, in his own limited area of experience, the sin of the devil. He is living like the devil, for the devil continues to live just as he began to live at the moment of his fall – independent of God and therefore opposed to God. This is the sin of the devil and is the nature of sin wherever it appears in human life, whether in a Christian or non-Christian. He who commits sin is of the devil because he is permitting the devil to reproduce in him the devil’s character, for the devil continues to live in the lawless attitude into which he fell when he sinned from the beginning.

Now the works of the devil are the natural result of the sin of the devil. They are what

inevitably follows. Sin is an attitude within the heart. It is an attitude of lawless disregard of the authority of God. But the works of the devil are the activities that result from that attitude. In Romans 8 the Apostle Paul uses a similar description, “the mind of the flesh” {cf, Rom 8:7}, which, he says, “is hostile to God,” enmity against God. That is an attitude within. That is the feeling, “I’ll run my own life. I don’t need any God to tell me what to do. I don’t need any God to support me or help me or tide me over difficulties, I can take care of my own affairs. I’ll run my own life.” That is the mind of the flesh, and it is hostile to God. But, in Galatians 5, Paul speaks of “the works of the flesh” {Gal 5:19}, immorality, impurity, enmity, strife, jealousy, selfishness, envy, carousing, drunkenness, and other things. These are the things that result from having the mind of the flesh.

In the passage that was read earlier from the 8th chapter of John, the Lord Jesus partially described the works of the devil for us. He said they are murder and lying. “He was a murderer from the beginning, and when he lies, he is only speaking out of his own character because he is a liar and the father of lies,” {John 8:44b RSV}. In John 10 he gives us yet another. Concerning the false shepherd whom he calls the thief he says, “The thief comes only to kill and to steal and to destroy,” {John 10:10a RSV}. Now these are the works of the devil – murder, lying and stealing – those three. They manifest themselves in various ways but they all sum up to these – murder, lying, stealing. These inevitably follow the sin of the devil, i.e., rebellion. Whenever there is a rebellious attitude in a human heart toward the authority and will of God, or that will reflected in the government of man, then the works of the devil will follow.

This is the way the devil attacks and misleads mankind:

- Morally, he steals away the blessings God intended for man. The devil never offers anything positive. All the things the devil apparently offers to mankind are but illusions, glimmering mists that disappear when you grab them. You are left with nothing but cobwebs and ashes in your hand, for there is no substance to them. The devil steals from us the blessings God would have man have: peace, quietness, courage, love and joy. In this way

the devil violates God's love by stealing and robbing us.

- Physically, the devil attacks mankind by destroying through disease – and all disease ultimately stems from the activity of the devil – and death. That does not deny the existence of bacteria or the reality of germs, but these are the activities of the devil in attacking the body of man.
- Also, by means of disaster, by war, by crime, by violence, the devil is active in human society – destroying. He delights to ravage, to twist and hate and break and smash and mangle. He loves this. That is why our newspapers are full of it all the time. That is what is behind the war in Viet Nam, the crime in our streets, and in our private homes as well.
- Intellectually, the devil attacks man by lying to him. He deceives him, tells him falsehoods, makes him act on principles that are wrong, directly contrary to fact. He teaches us to believe certain widespread proverbs that everybody accepts as true. “Watch out for yourself.” “You’ll never get ahead unless you think of yourself.” “Number One first, and the Devil take the hindmost.” We all act on them at times, because we believe the devil. Thus, he brings confusion and darkness and extinguishes the light that is in man.

All this is why intelligent, happy young people, moving into adulthood, are caught up in vicious, savage patterns of delusion and destruction. They believe the lies of the devil about sex and LSD and other things, and they allow him, through these, to steal their strength and their joy and their youth, and thus to destroy and to murder and to ravage among them. These are the works of the devil. Our newspapers are full of them all the time, and you can trace this throughout all of human history.

It was evident in the very beginning of the race, when Cain murdered his brother in order to steal his place of acceptance before God, and lied to God about what he had done. “Where is your brother?” Cain said, “I don’t know.” But he did know.

Remember how King David, after he had walked with God for years, and was a man after

God's own heart, chose to give way to the sin of the devil and to act lawlessly? He became a law unto himself and decided to get what he wanted apart from what God wanted. When he did, he stole from Uriah the Hittite his most precious possession, his wife. Then, in order to cover it up, he murdered him with nothing more lethal than a pen dipped in ink. Then he lied about it, in hypocrisy, covering it all over, until God sent Nathan the prophet to unveil the whole hideous story and bring it out into the open.

Remember that in the early Church Ananias and Sapphira sought to rob God of what they said belonged to God. They said they had given to him, but they had not. Because they wanted to gain a prestige among the Christians which they did not really possess, they lied to the Holy Spirit, as Peter accused them. And they destroyed the fellowship of the early Church, wrecking it for their own ends.

This is the business of the devil. His business is to tempt you in any way he can to adopt a sinful attitude of rebellion and willful independence; to say, in one way or another, “I want what I want, and I don’t care what anyone else wants.” That is the sin of the devil. When you do that, the inevitable result which you cannot escape is that the works of the devil follow. You discover that you will lie, you will steal, and you will destroy to whatever extent and degree you feel you can get away with. If not outwardly, openly, and brazenly, then it will be inwardly, subtly, respectably. But there is no way to escape.

We think we can. We are continually deluding ourselves by thinking we can control these reactions. “I’ll only go so far, I’ll give way to this willful desire, but then I’ll limit the reactions – I won’t let it go too far.” But as Jesus said in the Gospel of John, Chapter 8, “Truly, truly I say to you, every one who commits sin is a slave to sin,” {John 8:34 RSV}. You no longer have the power to determine how far it is going to go. It will go beyond your own desire, it will carry you farther than you want to go, and you will end up doing things that you never dreamed of doing once. We are always carried on beyond ourselves. We do not master sin; it masters us. It is only a matter of time before the results of it become evident and the works of the devil are there.

Now what is the answer to all this?

Well, there is only one answer. It is the answer that John gives us here, “The Son of God appeared

to destroy the works of the devil.” That is what Christ came for. He came to set us free from this bondage, to deliver us from this inevitable chain reaction. He literally came to unloose, to untie the works of the devil, as though these were actual chains about us.

I was interested in reading Dr. Paul Tournier recently, to see the way he put a certain truth. He said that when we come into the experience of the grace of God we find that the problems we were facing in life are not always solved; what happens to them is that they are dissolved. They simply disappear, they fade away like the morning mist. You do not find specific solutions to them so much as to simply find them disappearing, as God’s grace enfold and surrounds us.

This is exactly what John is saying. The Son of God has come to untie, to loosen the bonds of the devil, the works of the devil in human life, to dissolve them and thus to set us free.

Now how does he do this?

He does it by substituting the method God intended for living. The devil always imitates. He never comes up with anything original, for he cannot. He is forever imitating God with phony, cheap, and shabby imitations of the real thing. He imitates the Trinity – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – by substituting a false trinity – the world, the flesh and the devil. These are the great powers in human affairs today – the world, the flesh and the devil – and they are an imitation of God’s true character as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The devil also imitates the method of God, as well.

W. Stuart Briscoe, who is a young associate of Major Ian Thomas, put it very clearly this way. He says the way God intends man to live is as follows:

The death of Christ is the prelude to all Christian experience. When the Son of God died, he laid the groundwork for everything that happens in the Christian life.

The resurrection of Christ is the pattern of all Christian experience. Just as the Son of God arose from the dead, so we are to be constantly rising from the death around us into a new vitality, a new adventure of living, day by day.

To be in Christ, i.e., to be a Christian, is the province of all Christian experience. You never can experience real living unless you are in Christ.

But for Christ to be in us, that is the power of all Christian experience. That is how God intended man to live, a moment-by-moment dependence upon the power of Christ within. That is what makes life a continual thorough-going adventure story.

But the devil imitates this, too. He substitutes his own formula. The fall of Satan becomes the prelude to all sinful experience. The life of Satan, his present existence, is the pattern for sin, as we have seen. The devil is sinning as he did from the beginning, John says. That forms the pattern for all sin. The world of human society is the province of all sinful experience. It is society-governed and mastered by sinful, devilish principles, following the devil and unwittingly and unknowingly doing what the devil wants. That is the world. But within us is this strange thing called the flesh, which is the power of all sinful experience. There is the devil’s imitation of the work of the Son of God. The Son of God came to set the false aside and to restore us to the true. He came and died upon a bloody cross and rose again in power in order that in your life he might undo the works of the devil; he might break these cords and set you free, and teach you that when you live as God intended you to live, following the pattern that is in Jesus Christ, our victorious Lord, all the power of the devil and the antagonism of the world and the clever subtlety of the flesh is defeated. You can be free from these things, be delivered from them and mastered, not by the devil, but by the Son of God. That is when life begins to make sense.

Now John has much more to say about this, as to how it works in actual experience. But our question now is: “Has the Son of God been allowed to begin this work in your life?”

- Have you discovered him, and received him?
- Are you already repudiating the mind of the flesh with its rebellion against God, and setting it aside?
- Has the Son of God, in the might and power of his being, begun to dissolve in grace these problems in your life and to set you free to be what God intended you to be?

That is what church is all about, and what this whole service is all about. It is to open our minds and help us to see that what is happening around us, reported in our newspapers, finds its solution only in the Son of God and what he does in the individual life.

Has he begun that with you?

God grant that you can say, "Yes, at least he has begun, and day by day as I believe him and move out in the experience of this pattern I discover that 'if the Son shall set you free, you will be free indeed.'"

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for the revelation of this truth anew to us. What a glory is in this One who came and died that we might be free. As we gather now at this Table to which he has invited us, by which we remember that death, the pain and the agony of it, the cost of it, the blood, the sweat, the tears, and the patience that he manifested as he endured these things, God, grant to us that we may realize and appreciate anew what it cost to bring us this freedom, this deliverance, and enter into it with joy and gladness and with gratitude. We pray in His name, Amen.

When the Spirit says No

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to one of the most difficult verses in Scripture,

No one born of God commits sin, for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God. {1 Jn 3:9 RSV}

From time to time I run into someone who says he has gone beyond the ability to sin. He has arrived at what he calls *sinless perfection*. Obviously, these would be very difficult people to live with, but they are around and you may meet them from time to time. If, in trying to deal with them from the Scriptures, you should quote a verse like First John 1:8, "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us," they, relying upon the tactic which all cultists use "if they persecute you in one verse, flee into another," will turn to this verse in First John 3 and read to you, "No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot commit sin because he is born of God." There, they say triumphantly, God's Word itself says that it is possible, even necessary, for a real Christian to come to the place where he cannot sin.

So, through the centuries there have been many differing interpretations of this verse. It is a bit difficult, and many commentators have labored to explain it. Because I want to be as helpful as possible in these studies in First John, I would like briefly to mention these interpretations to you, lest you run into one some day. They boil down essentially to seven views of this verse:

1. First, there is the view I have just mentioned; those who feel this verse teaches that a Christian cannot commit even one single act of sin. These people almost always teach that this follows a crisis experience in the Christian's life which they call by various terms, usually

sanctification. A Christian passes through a time of crisis, faces himself and his whole sin nature, and the whole thing is settled, the sin nature is taken away, and from that time on the Christian cannot sin. It is a kind of religious "sheep dip" experience, where one goes through and comes out cleansed on the other side, so there is no further possibility of sinning.

I have already dealt with this in essence. John says in this same epistle, certainly with no intent to contradict himself, "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves," {1 Jn 1:8a RSV}. Those who hold this view are clearly self-deceived.

2. A second view suggests that the word sin should be narrowed down to certain specific things, certain gross sins, such as murder, adultery, cruelty and other violations of love. What the apostle is saying here is that it is impossible for Christians to commit certain kinds of sins. Most Catholic commentators take this verse to support the Catholic distinction between mortal and venial sins, i.e., certain sins which are mere peccadillos that can be forgiven, and others which are impossible to forgive. That view holds there are certain kinds of sins which no real Christian can commit. But the answer, of course, to that is that all the sins that are listed in whatever catalogue of mortal sins is in view, have been committed by believers mentioned in the Bible, so that it is clear from the Scriptures that believers can commit these sins. There is no such double standard for sins in the Scriptures as is suggested by this division of mortal and venial sins. It simply does not exist.

3. A third view of this passage (a view related to #2) is that this is referring to certain willful sins, i.e., it teaches a Christian cannot commit willful or deliberate sins. He may drift into sin, he may, through weakness or carelessness, fall into sin, but he never knowingly, deliberately, openly, violates the will of God. Again, the answer to it is to ask, "What about David in the Old Testament who willfully and deliberately committed the twin sins of murder and adultery?" The whole range of Christian experience as well as Scripture contradicts this. Who of us would dare claim that we never have willfully, deliberately sinned? How many of us are aware of the times when, knowing a thing to be wrong, we have deliberately gone ahead and done it? That view can hardly be the correct one.
4. A fourth view approaches this by teaching that sin in a believer is not regarded as such by God, that what may be done by an unbeliever and called sin is not so called when done by a believer; there is a difference between these. If an unbeliever tells a lie, that is a sin; but if a believer does it, that is a mistake, or, at most, a manifestation of weakness, but it is not a sin. That view is so presumptuous and so ridiculous as hardly to warrant an answer. It is enough to point out that, early in this passage, John defines sin for us: He says it is lawlessness, becoming a law unto yourself. Any act of it, whether committed by a Christian or a non-Christian is exactly the same – it is sin.
5. There is yet a fifth view of this passage which declares that John is describing here an ideal condition, not a realistic one, that ideally this should be true. This, of course, changes the meaning of the passage to make it say that a Christian should not sin, rather than he cannot. But that is to water down the force of the word which John uses. It is clear that what he says, plainly and without equivocation, is that a Christian cannot sin because he is born of God. So this view does not settle the matter.
6. A sixth view is widely held by many people, that John here is contrasting two natures within the believer:

- One which is received from Adam, the Adamic nature, the natural life, which always sins; and
- The other, the new nature received from God, which never sins.

This seems to be a plausible explanation of this verse, at least to many. I confess that for some time it had great appeal to me, until I began to examine the passage more critically. It is true, of course, that the old nature within a believer does sin, and the new life which God has implanted can never sin. This is most certainly true. But not natures are in view here but a whole person. It may be possible to distinguish between a conflict in desires within us (who is not aware of that? – a civil war going on in the presence of temptation, where we feel ourselves pulled first in one direction and then in another), but it is quite another thing to try to distinguish acts as belonging to one nature or another. A person acts as a whole being. A decision must be made between conflicting desires and the result is an act, but that act is the act of the whole person, not merely of one side of his being.

That kind of reasoning always reminds me of the burglar who was arrested and brought before a judge. His defense consisted of pointing out to the judge that it was not his whole body that was involved in the burglary, but only his arm and hand. Though he would freely admit that the arm and the hand had taken something that did not belong to him, nevertheless, it was unfair of the judge to punish his whole body along with the arm and the hand. The judge very wisely solved the problem by sentencing the arm and the hand to thirty days in jail, and leaving it up to the rest of the body whether it chose to accompany them or not!

It is true that the apostle says in Romans 7, "It is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me," {cf, Rom 7:17}. This would superficially lead us to think that Paul is making this kind of a distinction, saying, "I no longer sin. It is just something within me, that is not me anymore, which does this kind of a

thing.” But we can hardly take that view if we read the whole passage, for the apostle is clearly not denying a personal involvement in sin, but rather he is denying the conscious intent of sin. He is saying that even when he thinks he is avoiding sin, even when out of a dedicated, sincere, earnest desire to do the will of God, he is trying to do what God wants out of the energy and power of his flesh, he finds himself confronted yet with the results of sin – weakness, barrenness and despair. That whole struggle in Romans 7 is that baffling, frustrating experience of a person who, in utter dedication and sincerity, is trying to do God’s will but finds his life still in the doldrums of despair, depression and weakness which can only come as a result of sin. That is why he calls out, “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?” {Rom 7:24 KJV}.

7. The seventh view of this verse, and the one we espouse because it fits the context, is that the Apostle John is saying here that a Christian cannot persist in habitual, continual sin because he is born of God. He cannot sin without a struggle or without a sense of grief so powerful that ultimately, despite his struggles, he will be brought to repentance and a forsaking of sin. What he is declaring to us, then, is that sin is no longer natural to the believer. Though, for a time, he may slip into it rather easily, nevertheless, it is now contrary to his nature. His heart is set toward God, and his life is a truceless antagonism against sin, and this must become apparent by breaking away from the bondage and slavery of sin. “No one born of God commits sin; for God’s nature abides in him,” he declares. He cannot persist, he cannot go on continuously living in what he knows to be sin. This is made clear in the tense of the compound verb, *to commit sin*. It is not aorist, which would have meant a single act of sin, but rather it is the present, continuous tense, “to go on committing sin.” This usage fits the context of the verse. Twice John has told us that the Son of God has appeared to take away sin and to destroy, unloose, or dissolve the works of the devil, the results of sin. He comes into our lives by faith for this very purpose. Since he is a Sovereign,

Supreme Being, in whose hands all power in heaven and on earth resides, he moves irresistibly to this end within us. Therefore, it is quite to be expected that John would say it is not possible for anyone who has been born of God to go on endlessly living in sin, and content to do so.

This means that, if we have been born again, soon after our conversion (often very soon) there comes a time when the Spirit of God, who has filled us with joy, blessing, peace, assurance and other glorious things in Christ, begins to put his finger upon certain specific things and says, “No! These must go.” Our usual reaction is to say, “But they’re such little things, they really don’t bother. Let’s not talk about these trivial things, these peccadillos; let’s go on in this happy relationship together. Don’t disturb it now with these minor matters.” But they are not minor. They are the things that have been keeping us in bondage. They are the reason for our restlessness, our distress, our depression, and our heartache. Because God loves us, he will not put up with them, so he persists, he perseveres, despite our struggling and twisting; he is absolutely inflexible, ruthless. We twist about a dozen different ways and try to get around his insistence, but at every turn there he stands with his arms folded saying, “What are you going to do about this?”

Have you ever had that experience? Have you known what it means for the Spirit of God to say “No,” and, despite everything you do, you cannot get away from that “No”?

Other Scriptures confirm this interpretation of Verse 9:

- There is Philippians 1:6, which we often quote, “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work within you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.” He will not grow discouraged, he is not going to quit. He has started to free you from sin, and he is going to do it. He will not force your will, but he will bring you into circumstances that will make you listen, and at last he will do the job. “He who has begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.”

- There is that passage in Romans 8, Verse 29 which says, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son [that is the goal he has in mind, that is what he starts out to achieve in you], in order that he [the Son] might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Then he goes on, “And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified: and those whom he justified he also glorified.” You see, he is determined to do what he began.
- Again in Galatians 5, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would,” {Gal 5:17 RSV}. There is the Spirit of God standing across your path, like the angel stood across the pathway of Balaam, the prophet, as he sought in disobedience to do that which God had commanded him not to do. Everywhere he turned the angel stood across his path, and the only one intelligent enough to see him was the donkey Balaam rode. Thus God stands across our path. We cannot do the things that we would.

There have been times in my experience as a Christian when I have felt the full force and drive of some temptation, and was in a circumstance where I could have fulfilled it, I had every opportunity to do it, and felt a full desire to do so, but I couldn't. Something held me back; I just couldn't do it, despite all my desire. That is the Spirit saying, “No!”

Now notice what John says is the reason for all this; why John says it is true – because “God's nature [or God's seed] abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God.” When we are born again, something very radical has happened to us. There is a deep, radical, inward transformation which changes us from the bottom up. Because of that change, the process can never be reversed. God's seed abides in us and we cannot persist in habitual sin because there is a root within, a life that is constantly surging up, that simply will not permit this thing to go on forever.

Yesterday, in Southern California, I talked with a handsome young man, twenty-one years of age,

who told me that six months before he had been a college student, frustrated, restless, rootless; living in a constant depression. He described how continually despairing he was, and how life was one drab, colorless hue. In his desperation he had tried marijuana, LSD and several other things, but nothing helped at all. When I talked with him only six months later, he was a clear-eyed, happy-hearted youth – peaceful, joyful, obviously living life to the full. What had happened? In the meantime he had been born of God! It made all the difference in the world. He was a completely different person. He had been joined to Jesus Christ.

Now he did not have two natures; he had only one and it was linked to Christ, joined to Christ. As Paul says, “Christ, who is our life” {Col 3:4} will one day appear. As Christians we do not have any other life than his life, he is our life. We are married to him, is the way Paul describes it in Romans 7, married to him who is risen from the dead. We do not have any other life but that. It is true there is another nature within us, but it is not ours any more – it is a false life. The difference between these two natures is that, for the believer, one is true and the other is false. One is the true life that is his by virtue of being joined to Christ; the other is false. Temporarily we can act in response to that false life, but, like everything else false, it has no permanency about it. A Christian can commit single acts of sin, even repeatedly, for awhile; but he cannot go on, cannot habitually, persistently, contentedly live in sin. This is what John is declaring to us so plainly here.

We are joined to Christ. Because of this tie which exists and which can no longer be broken by us, the Spirit of God who dwells within us, and by whom we are sealed unto the day of redemption, who will never leave us, is continually pressing us on to enter this “abiding” state we have been discussing. We are joined to Christ by regeneration, but our attitude can sometimes be very resistant and difficult, and we are always striving to do everything ourselves. What the Spirit of God is constantly teaching us is to relax and to “abide” in him; to learn to be quietly, trustfully, dependent upon the life we have received within us to express itself through our actions, our words, and our deeds. That is abiding. As we have seen in Verse 6, “No one who abides in him sins;” {1 Jn 3:6 RSV}. This is why the Spirit of God is forever

putting us into circumstances which temporarily force us (and that word is not too strong) to abide in Christ. That is why even the newest believer in Jesus Christ, though he may not understand much at all about the theology of living in Christ, abiding in him, will nevertheless sometimes experience it, because he is put into circumstances that force him to do so, even if only for a limited period of time. This is God's way of teaching us that this is the intended basis of life, this is Standard Operating Procedure. "If we walk in the Spirit," Paul says in Galatians, "we will not fulfill the lusts of the flesh," {Gal 5:16 KJV}. So, to help us to break the habit of sin, God forces us into circumstances in which we must walk in the Spirit.

From this we can make two brief observations:

1. One is that this is the explanation for many of the pressures and trials we go through. Not for all of them, but for many. What is abiding? Well, trust and dependence. Thus when we get into a circumstance where we don't know what to do and we are rendered desperate by some pressure, then after we have exhausted every other possibility there is only one place left to go – to God, to Christ. When, in a kind of quiet desperation, we turn to him and say, "Lord, I've had it. I don't know what else to do but trust you," he says, "That's exactly the point I was hoping you'd see. That's what I've been trying to get you to do all along, to trust me, depend on me to work through you." Thus, in that desperate moment, even though it be for but a moment, we are abiding in Christ and the pattern and power of sin is broken for that moment.

You can see it in that story of Peter walking on the water. Remember, as the fearful disciples looked out from their boat in the midst of the storm, they saw Jesus walking on the waves. They thought he was a ghost. They were very frightened, but Jesus said, "Be not afraid, It is I." Then Peter, in his bold impulsiveness, said, "Lord, if it be you, bid me come to you on the water." The Lord immediately said, "Come." {cf, Matt 14:28-29}. Without thinking through all that was involved, Peter climbed out of the boat and started across on the water, doing fine – until he began to think about what he was doing. When he suddenly realized that he was out

away from the boat, unsupported, on the surface of the waves, and he saw them billowing up on either side and heard the wind blowing, he took his eyes off the Lord and down he went. About the time he began to blubber he looked up and saw the Lord and said, "Lord, save me," {Matt 14:30}. It is said to be the shortest prayer in the Bible. The Lord reached out his hand and lifted him up and the two of them walked back together on the water to the boat.

Now that is the Christian life. The Lord will put you in places where you have to say, "Lord, save me." He does this continually.

Yesterday at the Bible Study Fellowship Conference at Arrowhead Springs we had a sharing time. Among many wonderful expressions of God's faithful dealings with those present was one woman who stood up, and with her voice breaking with emotion, tears very close to the surface she said, "I want to tell you that a year ago I was arrested for nearly beating my two-and-a-half year old son to death. It so frightened me that I would be capable of doing a thing like that in anger that I began to listen to what the Lord was saying to me and I came to Christ." Then her voice did break, and with tears flooding down her cheeks, she said, "and you know, the greatest joy that I have in Bible Study Fellowship is that they've made me the attendant at the nursery. I've got eleven children and next year, they tell me, it will be doubled." She was so happy she could hardly contain herself. Now what taught her that lesson? It was God allowing her to be put into that circumstance, where in desperation she called out for help and thus abode in the Lord. Of course, he strengthened her because, "no one who abides in him sins."

2. Then the second observation we can make from this is that the inability to persist in sin is primary proof of the new life in Jesus Christ. If you are claiming to be a Christian, but you are not turning from sin, if you are going on week after week, month after month, year after year in a condition and relationship that you know is wrong, then you are not a Christian. Despite your experience, despite your claim, despite your attendance in church or anything

else, you have never been born again! This is the proof of it. Is that not what John says? No one who sins has either seen him or known him." No one who persists in sin, no one who habitually remains in a rebellious, lawless attitude toward God, has ever seen him or known him.

It is possible for both a sheep and a pig to fall into a mud hole, but the difference in their nature becomes immediately evident in their reaction. The pig is perfectly happy. He rolls over on his back, singing "Home Sweet Home." But the sheep is very disturbed, troubled, unhappy and miserable, and earnestly desires to get out.

So, John says, no one born of God can persist in habitual sin, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot go on sinning continuously, because he is born of God. The seed of God, the Spirit of God, the life of God, implanted by the Word of God, abides in him. It is as ineradicable as crabgrass! You know how you cannot get rid of that no matter what you do. You can spray it, you can dig it, you can pull it up, but it is still there the next spring.

So the world can, with its antagonism, spray the life of God, the devil can dig at it, but it cannot be gotten out, it is still there. That is what the mark of a real Christian is, he is growing away from sin, he is turning away from evil things. If you go on in sin you are deceiving yourself; you are not a child of God.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for these plain words from this apostle. He has made it crystal clear what must be the test. We cannot deceive you, Lord, for you know our hearts, but we can deceive ourselves so easily. What a wonderful comfort it is to know that if we have been born of you; our desire has been changed; there is something deep within us that rises above this passion and lust after sin which we admit is there, and which cancels it out, makes us turn from it and drives us on to purity, holiness and truth. We thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

One or the Other

by Ray C. Stedman

In this powerful first epistle, the Apostle John follows certain great themes which we have been tracing through the letter together: First, there was the theme of maintaining fellowship with the Son of God; following that, the theme of maintaining truth in a confused and deluded world; and now we are completing the theme of maintaining righteousness amidst a very wicked world. There are two themes to follow these, those of maintaining love, and of maintaining assurance. But today we shall take the final word in the series on Maintaining Righteousness, Verse 10 of Chapter 3. This concludes the section that begins with Verse 29 of Chapter 2.

In this section the apostle has briefly put the whole matter of maintaining righteousness into one verse, Verse 29, Chapter 2:

If you know that he is righteous, you may be sure that every one who does right is born of him. {1 Jn 2:29 RSV}

He says that the secret of doing right is to possess and experience within yourself the life of the Righteous One. There is only One who is righteous, or who ever has been righteous, the Lord Jesus himself. His life must be lived again in you in order for you to be righteous. There is no other basis. No flabby substitutes, no sleazy imitations, no cocky parodies, no grim copies, no slimy counterfeit, will be accepted. There is only one basis for righteousness and that is to reproduce, in the plan and purpose of God and by means of the Holy Spirit, the life of the Son of God in you. Nothing else than that is righteousness.

Now in the verses that follow (just briefly to recapitulate here), we see the effect of Christ's life in three dimensions:

- As to the future we are given a hope that purifies us. We look on to an event that is coming, more certain than anything that is happening in our world today, the return again of Jesus Christ.
- As to the past, we learn that the Son of God came into our hearts to remove lawlessness, the spirit of rejection of authority. That takes care of the past rebellion of our life. And,
- As to the present, he is come, John says, to deliver us from the works of the devil: from murder, from lying, from destruction, these things that always follow the lawless attitude of the devil.

The way life works is always a mystery to us. We do not even understand the workings of our own bodies. There are strange things going on within us even now that no doctor fully understands. Doctors know a great deal more about our bodies than most of us do, but even they do not know very much. The realm of their ignorance is tremendous, as anyone knows who has been sick for any length of time. The doctor cannot put his finger on what is wrong. Doctors themselves confess that this often is a difficult thing, and that they know very little about the functioning of the human body, compared with what they would like to know.

This is certainly true in areas of function that we often take for granted, as the brain – this tremendously complicated computer that instantly computes the most amazingly complicated reactions, and is constantly turning out information. Of course, as Dr. Dirks reminds us about computers, “if you put garbage in, you will get

garbage out,” and so sometimes they fail us. We also have these eyes, these marvelous cameras that are constantly recording events for us. They are much more complicated, much more intricate than any television camera, recording everything in color and three dimensional depth. We are able to reproduce all this also in the eye of the mind through the function of memory, which no one understands. These things are all vast areas of mystery to us. There is the ear, this amazing microphone which picks up sound more sensitively than this pulpit microphone, or any microphone that has ever been made, and reproduces it so accurately as to expose us to the whole realm of sound in nature. But we do not understand these things. They are mysteries to us. Certain functions we are able to grasp, but the rest remains a mystery. So the mystery of the operation of the life of Jesus Christ in us is filled with enigma and puzzlement.

John says in this very passage, “it does not yet appear what we shall be,” {1 Jn 3:2b}. How true that is. I have often thought that was put in there precisely for pastors, to encourage their hearts. Someone comes to me all upset about something, or perhaps they are complaining or griping about something going on in the church, or they are disturbed about what someone has said and their reaction is extremely petty and difficult. After they leave I say to myself, “Well, it does not yet appear what they shall be.” What a comfort it is that something positive is happening, even though it is not yet apparent. There are strange conflicts within ourselves, fierce battles which often rage, and may be raging right now, in your heart. You look up at me and look so peaceful – some almost asleep – but, for all I know, there may be some fierce conflict going on right now within you. You may be fighting a battle against anger or lust or some other violent feeling that has captured you, and holds you, and is shaking you to the very core of your being. This can all be taking place right here. How mysterious life is. No, “it does not yet appear what we shall be,” but one thing is certain, and to this John now brings us: It may not yet appear what we shall be, but it does already appear what we are!

The issue is made clear in this closing verse of this section, Verse 10 of Chapter 3:

By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother. {1 Jn 3:10 RSV}

I do not think anything could be put plainer than that. It is crystal clear from this verse that all humanity, in the sight of God, is divided into two classes.

Someone has said that people may be divided into two classes, the righteous and the unrighteous; and the classifying is always done by the righteous! Unfortunately, that may be true.

Certainly it is true that humanity is divided into two classes – not three, as we often fondly imagine. We would like to think there are the children of the devil, and the children of God, and then there is a vast group in between who are morally neutral, neither devilish nor angelic. Perhaps, if pressed on the point, most people would classify themselves in the middle somewhere. But God says “No.”

Characteristically throughout this letter, John draws the extremes of black and white, but these are not simply his ideas. These reflect the actual situation. Truth is truth and error is error. We have seen this before. John says there is no fellowship between them, no possible blending. There are no gray areas of truth – it is either white or its opposite, black. There are no shades or degrees of truth. So it is in this matter of mankind – we either belong to the children of God, or we are children of the devil, one or the other. There are not three classes.

Nor is there one class. There are many today who would have us believe that all men everywhere are, by virtue of their natural birth, children of God. But the Bible never sustains that idea for even a moment. These words of John are the echo of the words of the Lord Jesus himself when he said to certain Pharisees of his day, “You are of your father, the devil, and the works of your father you are going to be doing,” {cf, John 8:44}. This is what this phrase, “children of the devil” means. It does not mean that the devil created us, but it means that we reflect the nature and characteristics of the devil. We do so because we are tied, in some remarkably mysterious way, to his life. That is what constitutes someone a child of the devil, or what constitutes another in the opposite direction, a child of God.

Now, all of this is in harmony with the rest of Scripture, with the scriptural view of man. Man, the Bible says, is a vessel. He does not have power in himself, nor does he have life in himself. He is made to contain life. He is made to hold Someone, designed to contain and express the life of another. In the original intention of God, that life was to be the life of God himself. Man was made for God. That is why, as Augustine put it, we have within us a hunger for God that can never be stilled. Pascal said there is in every man a God-shaped vacuum, which only God can fill. We were made for God.

But according to the record of the Scripture, because of the Fall of man in the Garden, mankind today is no longer containing and expressing the life of God, but is expressing the perverted, twisted life of the devil. It is the life of God, but twisted by the devil. Thus, the life of man as it is manifest today is a twisted life, a perverted life. All of history and current events stands as a contemporary witness to the truth of that fact. That is why life goes on the way it is recorded in our newspapers today.

There is a great deal of misunderstanding which often prevails about this matter of the children of the devil. Perhaps most think of the children of the devil as violent, malicious, openly immoral people; those whom we would ordinarily call wicked people. The Communists, Jimmy Hoffa, and certain others, these are the children of the devil. It is true that the devil expresses his life in violence, in immorality, in lawlessness, defiance, and hostility. People who habitually reflect that attitude unquestionably are the children of the devil, because the Bible tells us the devil goes about "as a roaring lion" {1 Pet 5:8}, expressing himself as a lion does, in violent power. But that is not the only way the devil acts. The Bible also says that the devil is "an angel of light," {2 Cor 11:14}. He can also be suave, cultured, kindly, moral, and respectable, even sweet. It is possible for a life to reflect these characteristics and be equally as devilish as a life given over to open violence. As we have already seen, this but reflects our Lord's own teachings along this line. He said to religious, moral, respected and respectable men of his day, "You are of your father, the devil," {John 8:44}. They were appalled. They said, "What do you mean? We are not born of fornication. Our father is Abraham." He said, "If Abraham were your father, then you would love me

and you would hear me. But you are of your father the devil, and the works of your father you will be doing," {cf, John 8:39-47}.

As we view humanity from the Biblical point of view we see that, without exception, every one of us were born into the family of the devil. We were born children of the devil because we are part of the fallen race of Adam. We are children of Adam who sold himself to the devil, and all his children are like him in that respect. The tendency and proclivity toward sin, that twisted perversion, is passed along to us from our forefathers along with the color of our eyes, the eventual height of our bodies and all other physical features. We are born with a bent toward evil.

You only need to live with a few babies to see this demonstrated. How utterly self-centered a baby is! There is nothing more self-centered in the world. Everything exists for him, in his thinking. The whole world is there but to serve his particular need, and that, in essence, is the expression of the life of the devil.

It is only by new birth that we become members of the family of God, children of God. That is why Jesus said to that cultured, honored, respected leader of his own day, Nicodemus, who came to him by night, "Except you be born again, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God," {cf, John 3:3 KJV}. All your knowledge, your education, your morality, or your religion is of no value here. Unless you are born again you are still part and parcel of the family and the kingdom of Satan. The whole thrust of the gospel is always in this direction. It is to deliver men from the kingdom of Satan and to bring them into the kingdom of God, into the kingdom of Christ, the Son of his love.

That is what the Church exists for. If we do not declare that message we have no purpose for existing. The Church is not here to correct social conditions, primarily, except as the transference of men and women from the kingdom of Satan to the kingdom of God does correct and change the social conditions of their life. We are here to declare that there is a way out of the human mess, a way out of the troubles, difficulties, bondage and slavery of the kingdom of the devil.

Now there is also much misunderstanding about the phrase, "the children of God." Many people who hear Christians talking this way say, "What hypocrites you are! What do you mean,

‘children of God’? What makes you think you’re any better than anybody else? Why do you put on such airs, and act as though you are saints and we are sinners?” They seem to feel that if a person says that he is a child of God, that he is thereby claiming to be perfect and without sin. But no thoughtful, Bible-taught, Spirit-taught Christian ever takes that position. To be a child of God does not mean that we are perfect. It does not mean that we have yet learned all that is involved in being a child of God, nor begun to experience it ourselves. What it does mean is that the healing process has begun. God has begun a transforming work, and the evidences of it should be obvious right from the beginning. Not that it is all completed, but it is begun.

As you walk down a street you will often see a building with scaffoldings around it, and looking through the scaffolding you can see that there is no glass in the windows, and obviously things are in a state of incompleteness. A sign out in front says, “The Building Is Under Construction.” You would not write an angry letter to the contractor or the architect and say, “What’s the matter with you! What do you mean, claiming to be under construction? Why, I walked by there and there’s no glass, there is nothing finished about it at all.” He would reply, “Why, of course you are right. We never claimed it to be finished, it is simply under construction.” So this is what Christians are claiming when they use this phrase, children of God.

Now as we have also seen in this passage, and others, once we become a child of God by faith in Jesus Christ and are really born of God, it is an irreversible process. We cannot be unborn. God, having “begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ,” {Phil 1:6 KJV}. Once that wonderful change has taken place, God himself undertakes to bring us along, and he will do his job. We cannot lose this new life. Ah, but there is the rub! This is what John is pointing out. There are many people who sincerely think they are children of God because they have repeated a certain set of words, or prayed a certain prayer, or gone forward in a meeting, or performed some other activity or ritual, when actually they are not and never have been born again. They are self-deceived. What has happened is that the flesh, which is subtle, and, as Jeremiah put it, “irreversibly wicked” {cf, Jer 17:9}, i.e.,

unspeakably bad, has determined to remain in the seat of power (as it always does), and has simply turned religious or moral; perhaps it has cleaned up a few unsavory aspects of life and thus deceived the heart of the individual so that he thinks he is a Christian because he has done certain things. Now what happens in this case is that such people have been content with a surface change, or with a mere relief of feelings. Perhaps they were greatly distressed about some condition in their life, and someone talked to them about Christ. It looked like a way out, so they said, “Well, yes,” they would receive Christ, and they went through the performance of asking him to come into their life. But all they were really looking for was relief from the conditions they were under. They got relief, there was a temporary betterment of the problem, and they thought this was conversion, this was regeneration. But they never came to the place where, absolutely helpless, sensing that they could do nothing in themselves any more, they cast themselves upon the sustaining grace of God. That is what conversion is. It is a feeling of:

“I can’t do anything to help myself. There’s no improvement that I can bring about. I’m licked. I’ve got this problem within me, with which I’ve come face to face, and which I can do nothing to solve.”

Then the eye of faith sees the work of Jesus Christ upon the cross as doing for them what they could never do for themselves, and, casting themselves upon the grace of God in helpless, lack of self-trust, they are born again. God’s Spirit regenerates them and they move into the kingdom of God.

“Well,” you say, “how do you know that you’ve been born again? How can you really tell that this has happened?”

This is what Verse 10 is all about. All the apostles tell us this, but no one puts it any clearer than John. In the latter part of the tenth verse he says,

... whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother. {1 Jn 3:10b RSV}

In other words, the unmistakable sign, the “unimitatable” sign, is a two-fold mark. He puts it negatively. If he has not begun to turn from evil,

from wrong, and if he has not begun to love his brother, then he is only deceiving himself.

As we have just seen in the passage before this, John says that he who is born of God cannot continue to sin {see 1 Jn 3:9a RSV}. He just cannot do it. If you can go on living as you have always lived before you professed belief in Christ, then you have not been born again. You have only experienced a surface psychological reaction that is not the new birth at all. And this is quite possible. John does not say that he who is born of God should not continue to sin, he says he cannot do so, because the life in him says “No” to these things that are wrong, and he cannot go on in them. John will also go on to show us, this life in him will inevitably cause a person to begin to love his brother, to love those around him with a new kind of love. That is the subject of the next theme he will develop and this verse introduces it to us. I shall leave that till we come to it, but here is the two-fold mark:

1. Righteousness, and
2. Love,

and these two are interwoven, intertwined together. You cannot have the one without the other. As we saw in an earlier message, righteousness is love so behaving as to satisfy justice. Righteousness and love are thus intertwined together.

We will see later on in John that love is righteousness, seeking a way to avoid executing judgment if at all possible, but, if there is no other way, insisting on judgment. That is love. So the true sign of the new life is this dual mark. Rebellion against authority must begin to cease, and hostility and indifference toward others must begin to end.

Now, in all faithfulness, I must tell some of you that you are deceiving yourselves. There are some here, I am convinced, who think they are Christians but who are not Christians, who have never been born again. There are some who have been Christians, you thought, for years, but there has been no change in your attitude toward others. You have held resentments, and have been bitter about certain situations for years, and you have done nothing about them. There has been no upwelling of love within your heart to change your attitude and make you go to another and settle the problem that has been between you. There are

some of you who have professed to be Christians, and yet you have been going on consistently, week after week, month after month, year after year, doing things that the Word of God clearly says are wrong. You have covered them up. You have not let anyone know about them, and you think you have hidden them. If this is so, you are fooling yourself. You never have been born again.

We are dealing now with One who knows our hearts. You may fool us, you may fool your friends, and even your wife or husband, but you do not fool God. He knows the heart, and he precisely puts his finger on the situation as it is. He says if these changes are not occurring then you have never been born again.

Let me be even more specific:

There has come to my attention recently the rumor that certain people in this congregation are saying, “I know such-and-such is wrong, but I want to do it because everybody else is doing it around me. I think it would be fun, and I want to do it. Because I know God is forgiving and loving, I’m going to do it and then come back and ask for forgiveness afterwards.” Specifically, the deed contemplated is premarital sex, and the people involved are primarily young people, although there may be adults who have this attitude about that, or other things equally wrong.

If that is what you are saying, and you are acting on that basis, then let me say with all the authority of the Scripture, there is no clearer sign that you are a child of the devil than that! Despite all your profession, despite all your religious confession, or your experience, if you can say, “I’m going to do this thing that’s wrong and depend upon the grace of God to forgive me afterward,” you are of the devil; you are not a child of God. The lie of the devil is there.

Listen to it! You can hear echoes of what he said to Eve in the Garden of Eden. “You will not die! God is too loving and forgiving to ever execute that kind of penalty upon you.” He had first asked, “Has God said this? Is that the kind of a God you’ve got? Is he the kind that is so harsh and demanding that he will exclude you from this delightful thing?” Then in utter inconsistency (and the devil is always inconsistent), he immediately reverses himself and says, “Well, after all, you’re not going to die. God is too loving. He will never execute this sentence. He is such a gracious,

forgiving God, he will never take it out on you.” That is the devil’s lie. {See Gen 3:1-5}

Do you remember, in Romans 6, the Apostle Paul puts this very bluntly. Having reviewed all that God has done in Jesus Christ, he says,

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? {Rom 6:1 RSV}

That is, should we go right on sinning, depending upon God’s forgiving grace to take care of the situation? That is a rhetorical question, and there follows it one of the strongest negatives in the Greek New Testament. It is translated by various ways in our versions. In one it is, “By no means!” Another says, “God forbid.” Still another says, “May it never be!” But literally what the apostle says is, “It cannot be!” You cannot say that and be a child of God. He goes on to reinforce this by asking,

How can we who died to sin [in Christ] still live in it? {Rom 6:2b RSV}

It simply cannot be. There can be no genuine transference from the power of Satan to the power of the Son of God, if that be the case. You are kidding yourself. How can this thing be? It cannot be.

Now you may be tempted to think this. I suppose there is not a Christian among us who has not been tempted at times, under the force and lure of some temptation, to think this. But to act on that basis, to actually do something deliberately, provocatively, challenging God along that line, is absolute proof that the individual is a child of the devil, and has never been born again. Jude takes this up in his letter, a few pages on. In the fourth verse he says,

For admission [to the church] has been secretly gained by some who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly persons ... {Jude 1:4a RSV}

To be ungodly does not mean to be wicked or violent, it simply means to disregard God, pay no attention to what he says, go on and act the way you want, regardless of what God says. That is ungodliness.

... ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness ... {Jude 1:4b RSV}

Ungodly persons who utilize the forgiving grace and mercy of God to excuse their indulgence in licentious, sensual things:

... and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ. {Jude 1:4c RSV}

These Scriptures search us, do they not?

They probe right down to the depths of our lives. They do not let us get by with things at all. If someone is thinking this way, then the thing he needs to do, the only thing he can do, is to come as a common sinner, unredeemed as yet, into Jesus Christ; aware at last of the deceitfulness of his heart (that heart which is desperately evil, the prophet says) he must fling himself in helpless reliance upon Jesus Christ, and receive from him the gift of life, and be born again.

I have seen that happen. I have seen young people and older people alike, who thought for years they were Christians and drifted along with a surface manifestation of the Christian life, but within there was rebellion, and deliberate actions of deceit and hypocrisy. But at last God, in grace and faithfulness, made them see what they were doing, that they were merely deceiving their own hearts, and that they had never been born again. That was the moment of truth. God’s grace reached them, and they saw that they were still victims of the deluding power of the devil, still following the course of this world, still walking according to the lusts of the flesh, doing and fulfilling the desires of the heart and the mind, but never yet transferred to the kingdom of the Son of his love.

Are you there?

Have you been attending this church for years, perhaps even been raised here as a young person, but you have never been born again?

You never really have known what it is to have your inward desires changed. You have tried to get along by fooling people and by deceiving your own heart. We shall pause now, without asking you to do anything outward because what you do before us is of no importance, but we are going to ask you to settle this matter now before God. If you have been living like this, will you do business with him right now?

One or the Other

If you have not begun to turn from evil at the core of your being, and begun to love one another, to become warmer and richer and open, more tolerant, more friendly toward others, you have not been born again.

Prayer:

Lord, grant to us five minutes of honesty when we can see ourselves, see our own

lives, see where we are heading, see the forces that are gripping us, mastering us, whether they be God or whether they be Satan. There are no alternative choices, Lord. We pray that we may be clear on this matter right now. May the grace of God, fully and freely extended to any hungry heart, be ready to help us confess that we are victims, and make us victors in Jesus Christ. In Christ's name, Amen.

Copyright: © 1995 Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. This data file is the sole property of Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church. It may be copied only in its entirety for circulation freely without charge. All copies of this data file must contain the above copyright notice. This data file may not be copied in part, edited, revised, copied for resale or incorporated in any commercial publications, recordings, broadcasts, performances, displays or other products offered for sale, without the written permission of Discovery Publishing. Requests for permission should be made in writing and addressed to Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto, CA. 94306-3695.