

FORGIVE AND LIVE

by Ray C. Stedman

There is an oft-quoted prayer of an anonymous child who prayed, "Lord, make the bad people good and the good people nice." I think we all empathize with that prayer. So often it seems that being religious has a souring effect. We all know people who are undeniably "good" in the sense that they are moral, honest, upright, and truthful, but so often they are cold, rigid and unpleasant to be with, not *nice* at all. These are the kind who moved that child to pray that way.

If you are that kind of Christian, then you can be sure that you have not yet entered into New Testament Christianity. Such an experience indicates an incomplete Christian experience and, therefore, a counterfeit one. It indicates such have learned to put off certain negative things, certain wrong things, but have never yet gone on to put on the warmth and graciousness and love of Jesus Christ. You cannot read through the Gospel records without noting that the Lord Jesus was never gloomy or forbidding. People loved to be with him. Little children ran to him and enjoyed his company. Though he often felt deeply the hurt of others and so entered into the sorrows of men that he was known as "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" {Isa 53:3b RSV}, yet he continually manifested a spirit of warmth and graciousness that drew people out after him. I have often wondered how many days of work were lost during the days of our Lord's ministry, as people would leave their jobs and homes and whatever they were doing, even sometimes without adequate preparation for lunch, to follow him and hear the gracious words that proceeded from his lips.

Now that same character is reflected in the one who learns to put on Christ. Being a Christian makes a definite difference in your life. It must. A true conversion is immediately evident in changed actions. There are certain things that must no longer characterize your living, as Paul makes very clear. This is probably the aspect of Christianity that is best known to the world. They know that Christians do not do certain things. As we read here in this 4th chapter of Ephesians, a Christian must no longer lie or steal or fly into a temper, a selfish rage, or indulge in rotten talk of any kind.

But Christianity is not merely stopping these things. That is the mistake of so many. Even Christians feel that if they stop doing certain things which are prohibited as wrong by the Word of God, this marks them as Christians. It does not at all. This is where so much negative Christianity has arisen and why Christians are often stigmatized as being against everything. We are all acquainted with the five taboos which Christians are expected to avoid: no smoking, no drinking, no dancing, no gambling, and no bad movies. But it is unfortunate if Christians are known simply for being negative. The world ridicules that and is not impressed by it. I remember as a young Christian hearing a satirical jingle concerning Christians like that. It goes,

Rootytoot toot! Rootytoot toot!
We're the boys from the Institute.
We don't smoke and we don't chew
And we don't go out with girls that do.

That is the kind of impression that the world gets of Christian negativism, a kind of simpering pietism that is completely wrong.

The trouble is that such Christians have not learned to go on and put on Christ. As we have been seeing in Ephesians 4, we are not only to stop lying but to be positive, to put on Christ by speaking the truth in love with one another. That is quite a different thing. That opens up a whole new area of living. We are not merely to restrain our selfish tempers, but to seek the restoration of relationship with the one whom we have offended or who has offended us. There is to be a positive action. You have not acted as a Christian until you have sought out the one with whom you have a difficulty, and have made peace, if you can. We are not only to stop evil talk but we are to seek to speak positively, helpfully, and graciously in all situations. We are not only to stop stealing but to start giving. There is where Christianity begins to show itself.

Now it goes even deeper than changed actions. In Chapter 4, Verse 30, the apostle goes on to show us that the presence of the Holy Spirit in a Christian must not only change his actions, but his attitudes as well.

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. {Eph 4:30-32 RSV}

In that opening sentence the Apostle Paul puts his finger on the heart of the whole matter, "Grieve not the Holy Spirit of God." The key to all human behavior lies in man's relationship with God, not with his relationship with his fellow man. The latter is an effect which comes after the cause. The key is in our relationship with the God in whose presence we must live.

All of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, are daily embroiled in problems of human relationships. We have difficulties in getting along with people. There are those who irritate us, those who rub us the wrong way, those whose personalities clash with ours. There are those who are constantly sabotaging our plans by their thoughtless actions, and we react to them, everyone does. The world is giving a great deal of thought these days on how to deal with what the psychologists call "inter-personal relationships." They are trying as hard as they can, with all the wisdom they can muster, to get people to sit down and talk things out, try to understand one another, and thus create a spirit of understanding and sympathy. But the Scriptures always go deeper, always go to the heart of a matter.

The place to begin in solving our human relationships is not with other people but with our relationship to God. Our relationship with our brother will reflect our relationship to our God. It always does. There is always a vertical problem that must be taken care of first before the horizontal problem can be solved. So let us start with this vertical problem with God. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God." That is the place to start.

The word *grieve* here is a word that is related to love. It is impossible for you to grieve someone who does not love you, nor can you be grieved except by those whom you love. If someone who does not love you is offended by what you do, he is not grieved, but angry, enraged. Grief is always an indication of the presence of love. Therefore this word reveals that God loves us. The Holy Spirit is in us, as Christians, in order to help us, to bless us, to strengthen us, to teach us how to live. The activities that grieve him, therefore, are those that hurt us and harm us and therefore hurt his love.

And why are we not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God? The apostle suggests a very significant reason. Because, he says, Christians are sealed by him unto the day of redemption.

What does that mean?

These reasons, after all, are not put here merely to fill up space. When the writers of Scripture add a phrase like this it has deep significance, it has real meaning. It is a challenge to us, as we read our Bibles, to think these things through and try to find out why he says such a thing. "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, in whom [or by whom] you were sealed for the day of redemption."

A seal, as you know, is a protective device. It is designed to prevent loss or invasion. I spent part of my boyhood in a little town along the main line of the Great Northern Railroad in North Dakota. It was one of the busiest lines in the nation; trains kept coming constantly day and night along that busy railroad. We boys often played along the tracks and we early discovered that the railroad employed seals to seal their box cars with. They used a long aluminum strip with a ball on the end and a slit in the ball. When the free end of the strip was brought through the door and then fastened in the slot of the ball, there was no way to pull it out again. The box car was sealed for the length of its journey. It was protected from being broken into by that little aluminum strip which was designed to keep it until it got to its destination.

That is exactly the thought of this phrase here. The Holy Spirit is given to Christians to seal them, to guarantee that they will arrive at their, journey's destination, which is called here, "the day of redemption," the day of the

resurrection of the body, the day of the completion of God's activity of salvation for human beings. You have this brought out very clearly in the first chapter of this letter, the 13th verse. The apostle says there,

In him [i.e., in Christ] you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and have believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. {Eph 1:13-14 RSV}

We learn from this that the Holy Spirit has been given to everyone who believes in Jesus Christ. This is the mark of a Christian. This is why it is wrong to use the word "Christian" of someone who is not indwelt or possessed by the Holy Spirit. As Paul says in Romans 8, "If you do not have the Spirit of Christ, you are none of his," {cf, Rom 8:9}. You may be a church member, you may have been religious all your life, but unless you have believed in the Lord Jesus and received the gift of the Holy Spirit (this is not anything you feel; it is the quiet taking up of residence within the believer of the Holy Spirit of God at the moment you commit your faith and trust to Christ), you are not a Christian. If this has happened then you are a Christian, born again, and the Holy Spirit has begun his residence within you.

Now Paul makes clear that he has done so in order to bring you to your journey's end, to bring you to the day of redemption. He will never stop his work. As Paul writes to the Philippians, "I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ," {Phil 1:6 RSV}. In the Epistle to the Hebrews we are reminded in very clear, forthright language, "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, 'I will never fail you nor forsake you,'" {Heb 13:5 RSV}. The point the apostle is making here is that the Holy Spirit, in taking up his residence within us, does so permanently. Therefore, if you grieve him and offend him, though you might normally think that he would leave you, he has promised he will not. He will not leave you even though you hurt him, even though you grieve him, even though you disobey him. He will never leave you, that is the promise. But then you must live with a grieved Spirit.

Do you know what that is like? Have you ever sensed what it means to live with a grieved Spirit, the Holy Spirit within, grieved?

Well, let me describe it to you. I am sure you will recognize it if you have felt this, as a Christian. There is, first, a sense of inward conflict, a tension develops, a restlessness. The Holy Spirit is pulling us in one direction but the lusts of the flesh, the desires of the self-life, are pulling us in another direction. You remember how beautifully this is described in Galatians. Paul says there is a civil war that rages within us. The Spirit lusts against the flesh, and the flesh against the Spirit, so that we cannot do the things we would {cf, Gal 5:17 KJV}. There is a sense of turmoil, of tension, of restlessness. If nothing is done about it, if this goes on unheeded, we are no longer whole persons, we are divided against ourselves, we are fragmented.

Soon we begin to feel unhappy and depressed, joyless, heavy and listless. This is why Christians oftentimes drag themselves along to do things they know they ought to do. But we should not have to do that. Christianity is not intended to be a process of dragging ourselves, making ourselves do something God wants us to do, out of a sense of duty. The Spirit of God is described in Scripture as energy, energizing. In Paul's letter to the Colossians he speaks of his own ministry beautifully along this line. He says he is, "striving with all the energy which he [the Holy Spirit] mightily inspires within me," {Col 1:29 RSV}. So the Spirit is a driving force, and there is something wrong, something is the matter, if we find ourselves continually having to make ourselves do something that we know we ought to do. No, the Spirit of God is designed to be a driving energy. When we are listless, lethargic, apathetic and lukewarm, it is indicative there is something wrong; we may be grieving the Spirit of God.

Furthermore, once this inner peace is gone we soon discover we are beset by fears and anxieties, worries, nameless dreads. There are Christians, unfortunately, who live whole years at a time in this relationship. They are haunted by fear. Read your Bibles and you will see that the one thing the Christian must not do is be afraid. The word of the Lord Jesus repeated again and again to his disciples is, "Fear not." Why? "For I am with you," he said. Fear not! "Fear not those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul," {Matt 10:28 RSV}. "Be not anxious," he said, be not troubled about things. When you see terrible things happening on the earth, when

the nations begin to fall apart, when wars and rumors of wars spread across the face of the earth and men's hearts are failing them for fear of looking after the things that come upon the earth, what does he say to the Christian? Fear not! Lift up your heads and rejoice.

Now what he asks us to do he expects to energize us to accomplish, and he will. Walking in the Spirit means that we can fulfill these demands. And if we do not, if we are experiencing anxiety and dread and fear, it is a sign that we are grieving the Holy Spirit. "Perfect love casts out fear" {1 Jn 4:18 RSV}, John says, and if there is fear gripping our hearts it is a sign that something has interfered with the flow of the perfect love of the Holy Spirit within us. That is why we are so cold and loveless toward one another, so hard. It is an indication something is wrong. The Spirit is like a fire and fire is warm and attractive. The Christian who is always cold and unpleasant to be with obviously has something interfering with the flow of the Spirit's love in his life. He has grieved the Holy Spirit.

Let us go further, What is it that grieves the Holy Spirit? He tells us in Verse 31.

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice. {Eph 4:31 RSV}

Certainly, the wrong actions he has described before grieve the Holy Spirit, but they are relatively easy to spot. More subtle, and, therefore, more deadly are these wrong attitudes, the things we harbor within us that we do not let others see. We can cover these over with a happy smile or temporarily subdue them and keep them hidden by an effort of the will, yet beneath are bitter attitudes and wrathful feelings, anger, clamor, slander and malice. It is these which are grieving the Holy Spirit.

Look at them: *Bitterness*, what is that? Well, that is a hard, cynical hateful outlook toward someone else. The word *wrath* means "rage," hotheaded passion, losing your temper, in other words. *Anger* is a related word that means an inward boiling resulting in a desire to punish somebody, to strike back, to seek revenge. The word for *clamor* here is a word that means "to shout, to rail, to bawl someone out." *Slander* is speech that is injurious to someone else -- gossip, rumor spreading. *Malice* is malignity, i.e., the desire to injure someone else. What a terrible list this is. Yet these are the things the Holy Spirit sees in us. You see how superficial many of us are in judging our own lives? We think because we keep out of trouble and stay within the law that we have pleased God. Not at all. As the Holy Spirit looks at us he sees these things that are shocking to him, grieving to him. We look at them and we justify them. But let us be honest and admit they are there, and often there, in our Christian lives. This is what is producing weakness in our Christian living, these very things.

They may be present in your heart right now. You may be boiling with rage at someone right now, you may be seething at some possible fancied injury or insult that someone said to you just this morning, your husband or wife, or someone else. Well, if so, put it away. That is the word of the Lord. Put away these things, let them all be put away. That means to repent of them, change your mind about them, stop justifying them to yourself, stop saying you have a right to feel this way, stop defending them. Immediately when you do this, an ungrieved Spirit within will release to you the love of Christ, the kindness of a God who, as the Lord Jesus himself said, "is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish." That is what Christianity is, tenderheartedness, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave us.

"Well," someone says, "you don't know what I'm up against. You don't know what so-and-so has done to me. If you were in my shoes you wouldn't be able to forgive, either. I can't forgive, don't ask me to." I have had Christians say this to me, "I just can't forgive this person." Now there is a sense in which this is true. You cannot, you really cannot forgive them. Why? Because forgiveness is Step #2 and you have not done Step #1 yet. You cannot take Step #2 until you have done Step #1, that is for sure. Number 1 is to put away this wrong attitude. There are always two problems involved whenever a Christian holds a grudge or feels resentment against someone else. There is the situation that caused your feeling, that is one problem. But there is a closer, more immediate problem, and that is your reaction to this, your attitude toward him. That is where the Christian always has to start. This is our difficulty. We always want to start with the problem that caused the situation, that caused our feeling. But God says, No, first remove the beam that is in your own eye, then you will see clearly how to remove the mote that is in your brother's eye {cf, Matt 7:3-4, Luke 6:41-42}. Start with yourself, first. What is your attitude toward this other person? That is where you must start.

First, put away bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander and malice. Put it away. This is where the difficulty comes. When we get right down to that place we discover, oftentimes to our own shock, that we do not want to do it. We want to be bitter, we want to be vengeful; we enjoy it. We want to make people squirm. We want to make them crawl back to us and ask our forgiveness. We want revenge, that is what we are after. Why? Because if we talk to them about it, it will all be brought out in the open and the thing will be settled, and we do not want it settled. Someone senses our coldness, our inward fury, our silent, frozen attitude and says, "What's the matter?" And we lie, and say "Nothing, nothing's the matter." "Oh, I know something's the matter or you wouldn't act this way. What's the matter?" "OK, nothing!" Until finally we are driven to open up.

Why are we so reluctant? Because we enjoy it. That is what the Word of God reveals. These things are pleasurable to us, and this is where the problem lies. If we will obey God and put them away, then immediately the Holy Spirit who dwells within, whose task it is to give us that character of Jesus Christ which made him the worlds most attractive man, will immediately begin to release to us the tenderheartedness and the kindness of Christ and we can forgive as God in Christ forgave us. That is a wonderful measuring stick, is it not? Forgive, as God in Christ forgave you. That rules out such things as, "Well, I can forgive him but I won't forget." God forgot! It cuts out anything like, "I'll forgive him but I'll never speak to him again." God speaks to you again, does he not?

How did God in Christ forgive you? Have you forgotten that? That is what the Lord's Supper is designed to remind us of, how God in Christ forgave us. Think of it. He forgave you before you repented, did he not? He forgave you before there was any sign of turning on your part. You discovered that the moment you began to respond to him. His forgiveness was already there. You see this so beautifully in the parable of the Prodigal Son. That father's heart was yearning after the offending one, the son. He had been looking for him, watching for the slightest turning so that the father's heart of forgiveness could be opened up to that boy, and the moment he saw him a long ways off he ran and flung his arms around his neck and showed him his forgiveness.

Not only did God forgive us before we repented, he forgave us despite the hurt to himself. This is our problem. We say, "I know I should forgive, but he doesn't know how he's hurt me, and I can't forgive that hurt." Well, God did. There is no desire for revenge on his part. He does not try to pay us back for what we have done. He forgives it; he wipes it out. He forgave us completely, did he not? Is it not wonderful that God never gets historical about our sins? He is not forever bringing them up and throwing them in our faces. We shall never forget them, and that is quite right. Paul never forgot that he was a persecutor of the church. But God did.

Now this is the word for us. This is where Christianity begins to be manifest. "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."

We are going to come to the Lord's table and this table speaks to us in very eloquent terms of how we were forgiven in Christ. We sang a little while ago of the wonder that we would ever be forgiven.

And can it be that I shouldst gain
An interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused his pain,
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, didst die for me?

Perhaps there may be some who are even now harboring unforgiving attitudes toward someone else. The Word of God says if you come to the altar to offer a gift and there remember that you have ought against your brother, leave your gift at the altar and go and first be reconciled to your brother. Then come and offer your gift. You may not be able to do that physically at this moment, but if there is something in your heart against another you can go in spirit. You can put it away, you can forgive him, and then come and offer your gift of praise and thanksgiving unto God.

Prayer

Dear Father, forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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